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VAULT GUIDE TO
**TELEVISION
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television writing
career

**DAVID KUKOFF
AND THE STAFF OF VAULT**
1st Edition

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VAULT GUIDE TO TELEVISION WRITING CAREERS

DAVID KUKOFF AND THE STAFF OF VAULT

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Introduction

Television has been called everything from “the global village” to “the idiot box;” its presence and influence in our lives assessed as simultaneously overpowering and underutilized, and its original, scripted programming, no matter how good, rarely seems to get the respect it deserves. But television’s power as a universal storytelling medium remains unparalleled, despite an ever-increasing proliferation of TiVo, DVDs, and Internet possibilities.

Today, more people are trying to be television writers now than ever before. And the real-life success stories of lawyers and nurses who wrote scripts at night and now find themselves pulling down hefty salaries writing for *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Boston Legal* have made it abundantly clear that this is not simply a calling for so-called “creative types.” Indeed, the craft of television writing is as long on structure and discipline as it is on sheer creativity; how accessible it is depends on a number of factors, in particular how good or timely your writing is. With a methodical approach, some discipline, and a healthy dose of luck, you can realize your goal of becoming a professional television writer. With the help of this guide, you will learn how to:

- Sell yourself as either a dramatic writer or a sitcom writer (you won’t be able to be pitched as both initially, so it’s important that you focus on one).
- Write “spec” scripts—samples of existing shows that will showcase your skills and function as a kind of de facto resume.
- Determine whether or not to supplement your spec scripts with a second script, short story, or theatrical play.
- Get the right agent—the key, barring personal connections, to opening doors in the entertainment industry.
- Navigate the professional ropes of the industry once your spec scripts are finished, and understand the hierarchy of the networks, studios, and third-party producers.
- Take meetings with the almighty showrunners, who have the most weight in deciding whether or not to hire a writer.

Before you get started on the actual writing process, it is a good idea to first determine first what kind of television you’ll feel most comfortable writing—half-hour or hour-long. This might strike you as a bit limiting—is it necessary to write only one of the two? The answer, at least initially, is yes. While it is entirely possible to begin a career as writer of half-hour sitcoms

and ultimately segue into more dramatic one-hour fare, your agent will initially want to sell you as one or the other. So ask yourself the following questions: Are you funny? More than just class clown-funny, or drunken antics funny; do you tend to spot comic possibilities in conversations well ahead of when your peers tend to spot them? If so, you just might be a comedy writer in the making. Whereas if you are more inclined toward dramatic introspection, chances are you might be an invaluable addition to one of the more personal, character-driven shows. And if you are a *CSI* junkie and live for the plot-driven, modern-day mysteries at the root of the investigation procedure shows (shows like *Law And Order* and *Without a Trace* are referred to as “procedurals”), then perhaps this is an arena that will yield your ultimate professional calling.

Next up will be to generate some written material that, in industry parlance, strikes all who read it as “undeniably good.” But just what kind of “undeniably good” material should you make it your business to write? While it’s true that writers get hired off of all kinds of samples (with short stories and plays usually the best-represented literary mediums), the key thing a prospective employer will want to see will be a “spec” script—a sample episode of an existing show that will serve as an indication of your talent. The reason prospective employers will want to see how well you write for an existing show is because television writers don’t create new characters, instead writing for characters that already exist. So as unique, original, or funny as your original voice might be, your main priority here is to convey a sense of understanding the show’s rhythms and the voices of its characters. The ideal television spec script should be indistinguishable from a pile of episodes that have already aired, only far wittier and more dramatic than those put forth by actual TV writers who are pulling in mid-six-figure incomes—a perverse reality whose logic we will do our best to explain later.

It should be noted that, by “television writing,” this book refers only to mainstream sitcom and one-hour dramas for networks and premium and basic cable stations, the primary employers of scripted television writers. Writing for programming such as late-night talk shows, soap operas, and news programs is a different sort of writing with a different set of rules altogether and will not be covered in this guide.

A Brief History of Scripted Television

In the 1950s, shows like *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy* pioneered a new form of entertainment: the sitcom. The venerability and continued popularity of these shows, their ability to still “hold up” when their contemporaries more often than not don’t (does anyone really find *Leave It To Beaver* or *Father Knows Best* funny anymore?) make them true classics of the genre. Because in addition to being consistently and uproariously funny, *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy* plumbed universal comic archetypes and traditions while telling simple, easily resolvable stories. But whereas *The Honeymooners* almost began by mistake—as an offshoot of a character from the wildly successful *Jackie Gleason Show*, *I Love Lucy* was the cornerstone of a production empire (Desilu) that revolutionized television (Desi Arnaz, long thought to be Lucy’s real-life foil as on the show, was a brilliant businessman who leveraged the considerable power of *Lucy* in order to boost the budgets for Desilu’s other less-successful shows).

So what specifically about these shows makes them so universal today? Despite the superficial economic and cultural differences between Ralph and Alice of *The Honeymooners* and Lucy and Desi of *I Love Lucy*, both couples provided incisive examples of the lighter side of marriage through heightened, yet accessible ground-floor situations (Lucy and Desi’s language barrier, Ralph’s grandiose dreams versus his modest reality). What viewers loved (and still love) was the reality reflected on these shows; unlike the idealized situations that characterized many other shows, here were people who bickered with their spouses, thought more of themselves than the world tended to, couldn’t get a handle on the most basic domestic chores and had wacky neighbors and friends who sometimes impeded as much as they helped—all of which made the characters at the center of it all seem completely relatable... and thus, even funnier.

Whereas the sitcom struck many as a storytelling method perfectly suited to the new medium of television, dramatic scripted shows took more of a circuitous route to ubiquity. Certainly, classics like *The Twilight Zone* and a plethora of Westerns filled the airwaves with a different, unstaged form of entertainment. But television in the early days seemed best digested in half-hour chunks, and the popularity of the sitcom continued unabated throughout the 1950s and 1960s (although with the exception of shows like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* there was very little that would garner more than a perfunctorily nostalgic response from an audience today).

This all changed in the 1970s, widely considered to be the Golden Age of the American sitcom. Much in the same way the Beatles redefined popular music, shows like *All in the Family* and *Maude* challenged comedic boundaries and proved that you could be socially relevant and still get laughs. And shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Taxi* spawned a generation of comedy writers who would go on to create dozens of successful sitcoms among them (*Cheers* and *The Simpsons* being just two examples). On the lighter side, shows like *Happy Days*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *Soap* and *Barney Miller* don't hold up as giants but remained eminently watchable for decades to come. The public couldn't get enough of these smart, accessible shows, and the highly profitable business model of syndication—a sales system in which episodes of a show are sold to smaller stations (the syndicate outlets) for huge sums of money—was born.

At the same time that the sitcom was experiencing its most profound growth in social relevance and popularity, the one-hour drama was on the verge of an evolution of its own. True, cop shows like *Cannon* and *Hawaii Five-O* weren't exactly wowing Emmy-nominating committees, family dramas like *The Waltons* and *Eight Is Enough* went heavy on the saccharine, and the Western had all but died. *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island* were regarded by most critics as light, weekend escapist fare and even reasonably well-crafted mysteries like *The Rockford Files* and *McMillan and Wife* were deemed entertaining by pundits but hardly ground-shifting. But a serialized melodrama called *Dallas*—its audience galvanized by its “who shot J.R.” season cliffhanger—became the number-one-rated show in the country, and its contemporary spin on *Peyton Place*-like bad behaviors among the rich and beautiful became a guilty pleasure for millions of Americans... not to mention copycat-minded producers. And so when, in the early 1980s, the sitcom experienced a brief lull as long-running shows ended, sudsy nighttime soaps like *Dynasty* and its manifold spin-offs and knockoffs became the vogue among the nation's viewers.

But the sitcom was not easily dismissed. With the debut of *The Cosby Show* on Thursday nights at 8:00, which anchored a comedy lineup that first inspired the phrase “Must See TV,” NBC began a 20-year run as a powerhouse of Thursday night programming (only recently unseated as number one in its timeframe by CBS's formidable—and comedy-free—lineup of *Survivor*, *CSI*, and *Without a Trace*). With its crisp writing, telegenic cast and family-friendly values, *The Cosby Show* became an instant ratings juggernaut, scoring the highest ratings in the country for five years straight and paving the way for other major family-oriented hits such as *Family Ties*, *Who's The Boss?* and *Full House*, all of which sold for hundreds

of millions of dollars to syndication and only furthered the networks' efforts to mine the lucrative sitcom field.

For fans of dramatic fare, *Dynasty* wasn't the only commercially viable one-hour drama in the 1980s—although this show, which truly paved the way for today's hard-hitting, character-driven dramas, was nearly cancelled due to low ratings. In the early 1980s, Steven Bochco took a look at the cop shows of the past decade (some of which he'd written for) and decided that they needed an overhaul. After all, what was more dramatic than what the men and women of the police force go through on a daily basis? Through this reexamination of a genre left for dead following years of wooden acting and two-dimensional storylines, *Hill Street Blues* was born. With its signature call to "be careful out there," it told stories about people who felt real in situations that felt true. Low-rated and facing cancellation following its first season, *Hill Street Blues* inspired a massive letter-writing campaign from its fans that helped keep it on the air long enough to become a hit.

Shortly thereafter, offerings such as *L.A. Law* (another Bochco brainchild) and *St. Elsewhere* redefined the courtroom and hospital dramas, respectively, and the one-hour format was en route to becoming a juggernaut of substantive—and often non-formulaic—dramatic fare, soon including the beautifully-written yuppie drama *thirtysomething* as well as the screwball romantic detective comedy *Moonlighting*. Several attempts at half-hour "dramedies" failed to make this format palatable to the masses, although *The Wonder Years*, a show about a boy growing up in the American suburbs during the 1960s, was a major critical and mild commercial success.

The 1990s brought a steady parade of hugely profitable, critically-lauded sitcoms like *Roseanne* (which began in 1988 but hit its stride two years later), *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The word got out to the nation's finest schools—Harvard in particular, whose Harvard Lampoon has produced some of the nation's most prodigious comedy writers—that, rather than go to Wall Street or law school, the nation's best and brightest could easily go to Hollywood and make millions off a few chuckles. But the money-first attitude at the core of their aspirations, worldviews that seemed to borrow more from recycled television shows rather than personal experience, and changing economics of the television industry took their toll.

In 1994, there were sixty-five sitcoms on six networks, but ten years later, that number had been slashed by two-thirds; even critically-hailed shows like *Arrested Development* and *Scrubs* struggled to find an audience. Meanwhile, alongside ABC's boundary-pushing cop show *NYPD Blue* (yet another offering from the pioneering Bochco), a meat-and-potatoes cop drama called

Law And Order found a way to incorporate elements of both criminal and legal narratives. With its no-name ensemble cast and episodes that required no knowledge of past episodes, *Law And Order* spawned the procedural craze that continued with *CSI*, *Without A Trace*, and *Cold Case*. And at the end of the 90s, *The Sopranos* debuted on HBO, and its success proved that characters could be complex to the point of unsympathetic at times; shows like *The Shield* soon followed (and, in the process, put its network, FX, on the map much in the same way *The Sopranos* had for HBO).

With nothing picking up the slack in the wake of the final bows of industry stalwarts *Friends* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the sitcom's viability is unclear at the moment. Shows are still being ordered, but not in the quantities of a mere decade ago, and the freshman shows that do make it on the air are expected to return big ratings immediately (witness the example of *Joey*, which averaged nearly ten million viewers per episode in its first season, but was considered a disappointment when contrasted with the numbers of its parent show, *Friends*). And the current boom in reality shows has not threatened the one-hour shows, whose police procedural franchises (*Law and Order*, *CSI*) lawyer soaps (*Boston Legal*), and plain good old trashy soaps (*Desperate Housewives*, *The O.C.*) couldn't be healthier. Instead, the reality phenomenon has crept up on the half-hour formulas—so the sitcom is finding itself in a slump of historic proportions.

So what does this all mean for you? Simply this: becoming a sitcom writer is still eminently possible, but the television industry has scaled back in an attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff. So if your only goal is to receive a hefty paycheck for amounting to little more than the class clown, you'd be wise to look elsewhere for employment. And as far as the quality of dramatic writing is concerned, the competition is unquestionably fierce. Still, new writers are hired every year, and there is no reason why—with good professional sense, good scripts, and a bit of luck—one of those writers couldn't be you.

The Profession Of It All

Once you have figured out whether you are more comfortable writing half-hour or hour-long—and you should keep in mind that whereas the half-hour is almost exclusively the realm of the sitcom, the one-hour format, while mostly referred to as “drama,” can be something of a catch-all that ranges from the most buttoned-down, serious dramatic shows (*The West Wing*, *Law And Order*) to quirkier, often downright hilarious offerings like *Monk*—your

next step will be to skip to either part one (for half-hour writers) or part two (for one-hour writers) of this guide.

The objective is still to write two spec scripts that will serve as your calling card in the industry. Your goal should be to write two scripts that represent the full breadth of your writing abilities (or, if your abilities are best-suited to one particular genre, two strong samples indicating such). As with the sitcom, dramatic television shows are comprised of writing staffs headed up by a head writer, or “showrunner.” Your scripts need to attract the interest of an agent, whose responsibility it will then be to send them around town and get them read by various showrunners who will make decisions about which writers they intend to hire to join the writing staff of the show.

Once you grasp the principles of script writing—and have some workable material—then you can roll up your sleeves and study the business of the business: how to get an agent and get your work on the radar of the executives, producers, and writers in charge of hiring entry-level writers for shows. With any luck, you’ll be well on to your way to a financially rewarding, creatively fulfilling career as a professional television writer.

THE SCOOP

Chapter 1: Getting Started in Sitcom Writing

Chapter 2: Choosing a Sitcom Idea

Chapter 3: Sitcom Structure

Chapter 4: Getting Started in Dramatic Writing

Chapter 5: Characters in Dramas

Chapter 6: Story and Structure in Dramas

Chapter 7: Dialogue in Dramas

Getting Started in Sitcom Writing

CHAPTER 1

The Sitcom Format

The sitcom, historically the most maligned form of entertainment on television (at least until recently—the reality genre has done what it can to steal some thunder in this department), is also the format many industry insiders consider to be the most difficult to write. Which seems odd, for given the typically lowbrow tendencies of the basic network sitcom, one might naturally wonder how hard it could be.

The answer is, extremely. As a great English actor/manager, Sir Donald Wolfit, famously put it on his deathbed, “Dying is easy. Comedy is hard.” And when you add George Bernard Shaw’s famous quote “If I’d had more time, I would have written a shorter letter” to the equation, it suggests that the combination of brevity and humor yields a formidable task indeed.

A sitcom is essentially a two-act play in twenty-two minutes, in which a problem is established around the end of act one (the first commercial break), then resolved in the course of act two. Not only must the sitcom writer establish setup, resolution, gags, character growth, and story’s moral in so short a period of time, he also faces the daunting task of fitting it all into a version of reality that hyperextends well beyond the manner in which most people speak; he must be consistently funny and yet the situations and conversations he creates should feel like they could take place anywhere. To make a sitcom work as well as *Friends* or *Seinfeld*—shows whose hilarity was matched only by their seeming effortlessness—takes the kind of hard work and patience that only comes after years of dedication to a craft (and even then it is still more elusive than not). Witness the relatively short list of sitcoms that would pass muster as inductees in a theoretical Sitcom Hall Of Fame—as opposed to the interminable list of cancellations, half-runs, aborted pilots, and reams and reams of scripts that never even made it to air in the first place.

But if you’re not scared off by recent developments in the sitcom business—if you’re one of the millions whose viewing habits were shaped by classic shows whose laughs were pretty much a given and whose characters’ departures from the airwaves left you with a knot in your throat—then this field may very well be a calling for you. Chances are that you’re one of those

people whose wit at dinner parties has left others suggesting that “you should be a comedy writer,” and that you’ve found yourself thinking—wishing, even—the very same thing on the drive home. So what do you need to do in order to get started? How can you go from sitcom hopeful to sitcom professional?

First off, you need to write two spec scripts for existing shows. Ideally, these will be two shows that display as wide a range as possible of your talents, but most importantly they should be shows you could see yourself writing for. Start with the show’s uber-theme: what, underneath all the antics and humorous situations, is the show truly about, and is that a point of view that is consistent with your own sense of comic perspective? For example, many aspiring sitcom writers decided that *Seinfeld* was the embodiment of their own quirky lives, but the highway to sitcom riches is now littered with the dead specs that failed to capture the postmodern urban angst and dysfunctional surrogate-family dynamic that lay at the root of that show. And the Fox sitcom *Arrested Development* is lauded by critics (as well as by its sadly limited fan base) for its impeccably witty writing, but its uber-theme—given its “white-collar dad goes to jail” premise—merges a post-Enron/Worldcom universe with the reality that most parents aren’t as incorruptible as those portrayed in the *Father Knows Best* and *Cosby* models.

Your next step in evaluating the current crop of sitcoms should be to analyze the characters and figure out their purpose in the show (i.e., what type of comic point or points of view they represent). Then try to align their voices with your own comic voice: can you “hear” certain voices better than others? Do you understand the dynamics between the characters, and can you replicate them? For example, the insult humor bestowed by the lovably cranky Carla on *Cheers* was famous, but it was important to distinguish between the “you’re a loser” remarks aimed at the obese Norm and imbecilic Cliff and the “lady Di-job” cracks made—with a considerable amount of underlying jealousy—at the expense of Shelly Long’s pompous Diane. Whereas the insult humor on *Married with Children* required no such distinctions; everyone was fair game based on their weaknesses, which were invariably external, exaggerated, and obvious.

Okay, so you’ve narrowed down the list of existing shows to some good possibilities. Is there anything else you need to know before you officially make your selections? The answer is yes. Though it may be difficult to view them in this light, any prospective employer is also an audience member looking to be entertained. But the difference between him and the audience that watches television for mere entertainment purposes is that your prospective employer is an industry insider who spends the majority of his

professional days watching, reading, and thinking about television. So keep in mind the fact that he will more than likely have strong opinions about the show you've picked to write; you could be the next incarnation of Dorothy Parker, but if you opt to display your wares with a sample episode of the show *According To Jim*—a show tolerated by audiences but disliked by industry insiders—the fruits of your labor would most likely find their way into the garbage can based on the title page alone. Big-star, contrived shows, while desirable to executives and, occasionally, to audiences, typically fail to impress the writers who head up the writing staffs of these shows (even if they are, in fact, writing for such a show!) As a rule, writers tend to be more responsive to shows they consider to be written by “writer’s writers”—shows that are reflective of quirky worldviews and that feel more individualistic. These shows have a way of opening the medium up from the inherent staginess that drives the “multi-camera shows,” which tend to be filmed live in front of a studio audience, with enhanced laugh tracks.

Ideally, your spec script should be culled from one of the following types of shows:

1. **Single-camera “edgy”:** Shows like *Arrested Development*, *Scrubs*, and *Malcolm In The Middle* are filmed like kinetic, small-screen movies rather than static plays on a stage (the way multi-camera, more traditional sitcoms are filmed) and thus are able to take more tonal and stylistic liberties. The never-ending music cues, sound effects, and departures from reality allow the aspiring writer to roll up his sleeves and shape humor that goes beyond the more one-dimensional character-driven witticisms of more conventional sitcoms. This kind of visual freedom permits for real filmmaking techniques to be employed and thus tends to yield a fresher, funnier spec.
2. **HBO smart “verite”:** With shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Comeback*, and *Entourage* (all of which tend to take place prominently in Hollywood), HBO has become known as the home of the quirky, self-aware sitcom: the show that tackles the subject of the people who work behind the scenes. But their shows are more than clever Chinese Box structures with beautiful people lamenting their beautiful lives; these shows, often filmed without a laugh track, tend to be funnier and better written than most other network and cable shows. Their low-tech and even lower key approach to their subjects (who are even sometimes filmed out of focus) create an environment where the laughs derive from the real vicissitudes of life rather than from situations that feel exceedingly contrived or hyperactively and blandly wacky. The inherent truth of real adult observations and worldviews is what makes “verite”

comedy resonate much deeper with audiences... and fellow writers, who will be evaluating these specs.

3. **The Fringe:** The explosion of channels available to the typical viewer has convinced executives at some of these outlets that programming doesn't necessarily have to entice ten million viewers—just a tenth of this number, in many cases, is plenty sufficient for their purposes. So these programmers are at liberty to produce more envelope-pushing fare and hope that it hits with a small but loyal fan base whose zeal will make it something of an Internet sensation—the modern-day media equivalent of a grass-roots movement. You could, conceivably, write a spec *Punk'd* or *Pimp My Ride*—as long as its contents were funny and adhered to some dramatic principles. Witness the true story of the aspiring comedy writer who, fed up with the available choices on which to base a spec, wrote a spec *Project Greenlight*. The result was not only a funny script, but a novel comic approach that got the writer several meetings—and ultimately a job on a show.
4. **The Gold Standard:** In the past, writers had dependable templates like *Cheers* or *Seinfeld* on which to graft new episode ideas that easily yielded professional-quality specs. But in today's market, what shows can provide writers with a wealth of spec-worthy material? *Everybody Loves Raymond* is gone—as are *Friends* and *Frasier*. But a classic is a classic. Believe it or not, some writers have taken to writing spec *All In The Family*, *MASH*, or *Cheers* episodes in recent years. Remember that this strategy only pays off if the executives and writers in question are familiar with the show for which you are writing... but the good news is that virtually all of them are, and will welcome the relief from the mile-high stack of *Arrested Development* specs they've got sitting on their desk.

Bear in mind that no matter how well-written your sample episode is, it will probably never be considered for airtime by the writers of that show; generally speaking, they are simply too protective of the characters they feel only they can truly bring to life. But done right, a sample *Curb Your Enthusiasm* could yield a plethora of meetings and ultimately help get you a job on the new Julia Louis-Dreyfus sitcom. Your philosophy should be to write it as though it were airing tomorrow, but for professional purposes to use it simply as a calling card.

Formatting

Screenwriting software has become such an indispensable part of the entertainment industry that virtually every production company, agency, management company and studio has at least one version of a program installed on its computers. The best-selling program is Final Draft, although it is important to note that less popular programs do make concessions for export compatibility. For those writers who need to write on a more conventional word processing program, the format should adhere to the guidelines set forth in the following sections.

Title Page

Your title page—the page that precedes the body of the script—should simply state the name of the show in capital letters, the title of your episode (not in capital letters, but with quotation marks), then finally your name. The rest of the page, after your name, should be left blank.

CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

“Oops, I Did It Again!”

by

Your Name

Many writers place a line on the bottom of the title page informing the reader that their script is copyrighted or registered with the Writer’s Guild (a subject we will cover in greater detail in a later chapter). This is not necessary; most readers will assume this fact anyway, and have virtually no incentive to steal your script whatsoever.

Individual Scenes

As we said before, a sitcom script is divided into two acts, each of which is comprised of a series of individual scenes. These scenes have capital letters that serve as a chapter heading of sorts (i.e., “A,” “B,” etc.); you can, however, simply go with the good, old-fashioned “Scene 1,” “Scene 2,” option if you please. The scene heading should go in the middle of the page, about a third of the way down, and is usually bracketed by parentheses, like this:

(A)

Bear in mind that whenever you're dealing with the beginning of an act, you should include this information above the scene heading—in the center of the page and in capital letters—like this:

ACT ONE

(A)

As to the matter of just how many scenes should encompass an act, the best way to gauge this is to watch the show for which you wish to write and get a rough estimate. *Seinfeld* was famous for rapid-fire banter and scenes that might encompass all of one visual and no dialogue whatsoever; it was not uncommon, therefore, for an act to be as many as ten scenes long. *The Cosby Show*, on the other hand, employed a more easygoing pace frequently built around Bill Cosby's monologues about parenting, and some of its acts used as few as two or three scenes.

Scene heading

A scene heading simply establishes three things: interior or exterior, location, and time of day. Your typical scene heading would look something like this:

INT. MILLER HOUSE – DAY

Note that the commands for both "Interior" and "Exterior" are abbreviated, and that there is little need to qualify the time of day as anything other than day or night; such distinctions as "DUSK" or "DAYBREAK" are barely used in far more detail-oriented, original feature-length screenplays, let alone sitcom spec scripts.

Narration

Narration describes the setting as well as the characters' actions. Multi-camera shows tend to employ little narration in consideration of the limited scope of their sets, while single-camera shows sometimes require the writer to write extensive passages without a single word of dialogue (whose rules we will address in the next section).

Sitcom scenes begin with a description of who is present; the description is capitalized, underlined, single-spaced and in parentheses:

ACT ONE

(A)

INT. MILLER HOUSE – DAY

(Stan, Susie, Richard, Pizza Delivery Guy)

Here you describe the setting and situation—are the characters sitting at the dinner table? On the couch reading?—without explaining too much by way of emotional atmosphere. Simply establish what it is the reader/viewer is looking at, then make sure the result is capitalized and double-spaced:

STAN AND SUSIE ARE SITTING ON THE SOFA, EACH ONE
READING TO HIM OR HERSELF.

SFX: DOORBELL.

The letters “SFX” above stand for “sound effects,” which you will need to use every time the phone or doorbell rings.

If you are writing for one of the more kinetic single-camera shows like *Malcolm in the Middle* or *Scrubs*, you might find your characters in more fast-paced situations that will warrant your using more narrative. The important thing is to try to keep your script consistent with the show’s needs; a spec episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond* might involve some zaniness on the part of the characters, but remember that the people reading these will ultimately be judging them for wit and character consistency rather than elaborate sight and visual gags.

Dialogue

Dialogue for most sitcoms is double-spaced and placed at the center of the page. The character’s name should be at the top of the block of dialogue, followed by the dialogue itself, like this:

MALCOLM

But why are we stopping here? I’m first getting
comfortable!

To add a physical gesture, you would typically place it in capital letters and parentheses, then place it in the body of the dialogue:

MALCOLM

Okay, I understand. (WAVES HIS ARM
DISMISSIVELY) My creature comforts are far less
important than your creatures.

If a character has to physically get up, you would break up the block of dialogue and return to the narrative, then return to the character. If nobody else has spoken since, you need to indicate this by typing CONT'D in parentheses next to the character's name:

MALCOLM

Hang on, I'll get it.

MALCOLM STANDS UP, WALKS OVER TO THE
DOOR, AND OPENS IT.

MALCOLM (CONT'D)

(TURNING BACK TO SELMA) There, are you
happy now?

If one block of a character's dialogue spills over from one page to the next, you simply write the word "MORE" in capitals and parentheses at the bottom of the page, then resume that character's dialogue on the next page using the same "CONT'D" you used in the above guidelines, like this:

MALCOLM

It's just that the only thing I like
(MORE)

MALCOLM (CONT'D)

these days is my robotics course. Unfortunately, it's
taught by a robot.

It is not necessary to end the block of dialogue at the end of one page with three dots, or two dashes, or any typical grammatical continuation indices.

Why Popular Shows Like *Still Standing* Don't Make For Good Spec Scripts

Chances are that you have seen (or at least are aware of) the multi-camera show *Still Standing*, which airs on CBS on Monday nights and stars Mark Eddy and Jami Gertz. The show's ratings are high enough to have made it a modest hit, and it features two appealing leads who go the extra mile to get laughs from the studio audiences. And its family-related premise means that its situations will be nothing if not universal. So why wouldn't a *Still Standing* script be a good spec for you to consider writing? Well, for starters, many professional writers don't love to watch *Still Standing*. It's not one of the hip, edgy "writers'" shows that other writers respect and aspire to.

Still Standing is more cute, even giggle-worthy, than uproarious, and its characters fall more in the "wacky" category than "quirky" or "idiosyncratic." In other words, it doesn't provide as rich a mine for you to really impress readers with your comedy chops; think trying to win the Indianapolis 500 with a Hyundai Excel. Even if you pound out a script that is respectable enough, it most likely will still wind up in the discard pile based solely on the first two words on the title page.

Keep in mind that the writers who read spec scripts in consideration of hiring other writers for staff jobs are going to be staring down a huge pile of these scripts. Anticipate that when writing a spec, and put yourself in their shoes—if it's ten o'clock on a Sunday night, and I've glanced at, skimmed, or read upwards of thirty scripts, would I want to read a spec episode of a show I never watch myself? Just make sure you entertain—bring something to the read that the reader isn't expecting from a novice. The chances that you'll get a meeting based on an uneven script based on a show they like is far greater than if you write a perfectly competent episode of one they don't. *Still Standing* might wind up enjoying a much longer run than a show like *Arrested Development* and might wind up earning much more money for its creators in syndication, but when it comes to writing spec scripts *Still Standing* offers very little bang for its buck.

Choosing a Sitcom Idea

CHAPTER 2

Okay, you've figured out the shows that you'd like to use as templates for your spec scripts. Now how do you go about selecting the idea that will form the basis of your script? Since your typical established sitcom employs a large staff of well-paid writers who spend long hours cooking up hilarious scenarios, the bar is set pretty high as far as generating fresh material is concerned.

The bad news

The Catch-22 above is essentially that in order for a show to establish great characters, it must exhaustively put those characters through years' worth of episodic paces. Which is challenging enough for the existing staff, not to mention a novice like yourself. Chances are that anything that smacks of a novel story idea will already have been explored, and will have either already have been written, or discarded for being insufficiently funny or characteristic of the show.

The good news

Just because an episode idea that may seem obvious to you hasn't already been on the air is no reason to discard it for your own purposes. The likelihood is high that the writers may already have considered it, but the reasons they ultimately shelved it could range from petty (the show's star might have considered elements of the story unflattering to his character) to political (the network considered it "risky"). Which means that the idea itself could be perfectly viable, on spec-perhaps even perfect for the purposes of a reader, especially if it is risky (controversial subject matter often translates into a more uproarious read).

Episode Templates

As an ardent student of sitcoms, you've probably started to notice a few patterns by now—as in, isn't that bit in *My Wife And Children* with Damon's son on the order of the "no playing ball in the house" episode of "The Brady Bunch?" Or didn't Malcolm's last problem on *Malcolm in the Middle* eerily echo an episode of *Parker Lewis Can't Lose*? Even quirky, idiosyncratic shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* occasionally borrow from the patterns of

successful past sitcoms—albeit with a more high-concept, outrageous wrinkle that may have been considered too forward-thinking for its half-hour predecessors. This is because sitcom episodes, just like aluminum cans and plastic bottles, are recyclable. Sitcom characters experience the same problems the rest of us do—that never changes. Here are a few archetypal plot hinges that you might consider using for a calling card-worthy sitcom spec:

- 1. The Classic Misunderstanding:** It is often remarked upon that the 1970's bedroom farce *Three's Company* managed to last over ten years on one simple premise—someone overheard something that they misinterpreted (and that the audience knew that they were misinterpreting) and their reaction only complicated the situation. And even though you'd be hard-pressed to find a show these days as campy as *Three's Company*, whose set-ups tended to involve closed doors and exaggerated reactions, there are still plenty of situationally-driven shows whose ground-floor premises make for interesting misunderstandings. Any family show, for example; just have the younger daughter overhear—or intercept—news for her older sister that she misinterprets. A gang comedy; an especially memorable episode of *Cheers* once had Diane answer a call meant for her fiancé Sam, in which she learned that the diamond engagement ring he had bought for her was fake. The problem was, as Diane found out upon tossing her ring down the sewer, that Sam had felt guilty and had bought her a real one, with which he'd replaced the fake one—and which was now en route to Boston's polluted harbor.
- 2. The Job Switch:** As old—and venerable—a premise as exists, the concept of a husband and wife switching careers for the day goes all the way back to a Danish folk tale (but more recently, to *I Love Lucy*). Though the notion of the piggish male who simply doesn't understand how hard his wife works just to keep the house afloat—and the wife who feels that it's all fun and water cooler moments at the office—might be a bit dated, the idea that husbands and wives always seem to feel the other one has it easier is timeless. Thus, any show that has established clearly defined roles for its husband and wife is an easy mark for such a reversal... and you should have no trouble at all both envisioning and choreographing the hilarity that ensues as a result.
- 3. The Battle of the Sexes:** Similar to the principles outlined above, but different in execution. The “battle of the sexes” episode involves a gauntlet thrown down by a man or woman, but then resolved over the course of a bowling match, or obstacle course, etc., until one side is declared the winner of whatever led to their dispute in the first place.

And though it may strike someone as silly that a contest could settle anything (which is frequently the point), both offending sides are usually made to see the other's point of view by the time the episode draws to a close.

4. **The Ex:** Since everyone's spouse enjoyed some semblance of a dating life prior to meeting their betrothed, and every spouse assumes that the men or women their spouse dated were naturally inferior to them, it is only natural to mine this situation for yuks galore. The arrival of a character's ex-boyfriend or girlfriend—and the invariable surprise they're packing (a fat girl got thin, a dweeby, reedy boy became a handsome, muscular—or wealthy—man), creates tension... and tension inevitably creates laughs. And yet because there is true vulnerability here, there is also the opportunity for a poignant ending—which is tonally characteristic of shows like *Everybody Loves Raymond* and even *Malcolm in the Middle*. And you shouldn't shy away from that; pathos, after all, is the highest form of comic convention, and most of the great shows (with the exception, perhaps, of *Seinfeld*, whose avowed motto was "no hugging, no learning") weren't afraid to tug on the heartstrings of their viewers.
5. **The High School Prom:** Similar in theme to "The Ex" episode, but in this situation the characters can re-visit a whole host of past ills. Every universal foe from the jock or cheerleader who tormented our hero twenty years ago to the girl or guy he or she wanted is fair game for an update... or twist. Consider the classic *Taxi* episode in which Louie, the undersized troglodyte played by Danny DeVito, doesn't want to go to his reunion and admit that everyone was pretty much right about the way he would turn out. Instead, he recruits good-looking unemployed actor Bobby Wheeler (Jeff Conaway), who does a killer impersonation of him, to go in his stead. Bobby's *Louie* winds up getting the girl, insulting the guy, and pretty much leaving the place in chaos—to the immense delight of Louie and audiences everywhere.
6. **The "I Saw You Naked, Tee-Hee":** Believe it or not, something of a standard in the sitcom world. Shows from *Friends* to *Seinfeld* have used this situation, either to raise sexual tension to a boiling point or just to create comic chaos; suffice it to say, such a conceit isn't a staple in European sitcoms.
7. **The Road Trip:** Not just for college anymore, this episode template involves several of a show's characters hitting the open road for a variety of reasons—vacation, convention, or just plain good old fun. Episodes

like this give the characters a chance to confront dynamics that otherwise remain dormant under ordinary circumstances. Plus, the chance to watch people have to inhabit spaces smaller than the ones they're used to and perform duties for which they're simply not equipped invariably yields guffaws galore; witness the episode of *Married With Children* in which Al, Steve, and Bud go camping with Peg, Marcy, and Kelly... and the women all get their monthly bill at the same time. The resulting chaos involves mood swings and temper tantrums, and climaxes with about a thousand animals descending on the Bundys' cabin. Tasteless though this may seem, it's pretty safe to assume that if this were written as a spec episode it would have been a huge hit with readers.

8. **The Juggling of Priorities:** Chaos—and hilarity—inevitably ensues when one of the main characters commits to be in two places at the same time. The conflict invariably involves two very serious aspects of the character's life, such as work and boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse, and the attempt to juggle both and be in two places at once creates a comic set of circumstances to which most readers can relate.
9. **The Thing(s) That Wouldn't Leave:** As painfully uncomfortable as it is in real life (which is one of the reasons it's so funny on TV), cohabitation is one of the comic go-to guys that can always be counted on for a good laugh. In some cases it's the husband/wife's best friend from college, but if you're dealing with a show in which in-laws have been established, it's best to err on the side of family if you want to bring on the real belly laughs. Every personal peccadillo from what they do (or don't) eat to the way they have to have their clothing washed is ripe for satire, and the good news is that depending on your real-life situation, you shouldn't have to resort to too much invention. Throw in a holiday, some inclement weather, and a decade's worth of cultural differences and you can virtually assure yourself a bonanza of giggles at your characters' expense.

Case Study: A Sitcom Writer Hits the Pitch Trail

I had just graduated from college. Between trips to my favorite hot dog stand and the local temp agency (which told me that the straight A's I'd received didn't count for squat unless I could type seventy words a minute worth of straight A's), I was pretty much killing time, and the feeling was mutual.

Then a funny thing happened—literally. I started watching TV. Not in the way I'd spent several bored summers as a junior high school pre-teen, mind you; this time I really watched. Slowly but surely, I began to see patterns emerging... and not just the ones that were imprinted on the back of my eyelids from excessive exposure to the tube. Story templates were repeated over and over again, such as the infinite variations on the "Beaver broke the screen door" episode of *Leave It To Beaver*. I began to take note; I'd always wanted to be a writer and had even studied playwriting in school (one of the A's I was finding so useful in the real world). It seemed to me that the commercial break was no different from the act breaks I'd used as cliffhangers in all the two-act plays I'd written in college (a hypothesis I would later find out was correct), and so armed with little more than a lot of time to spare and my assumption that, episodically speaking, what comes around goes around in the sitcom world, I set out to write a couple of sample episodes.

I wrote one—that was all it took. I recalled an episode of *Diff'rent Strokes* in which Arnold, the pint-sized, wisecracking character played by Gary Coleman, and Willis, his older brother, attempt to gain admission to their adoptive father's snooty prep school. Upon hearing that the boys flunked the admissions test, the father realizes that the questions were culturally biased (Arnold had one memorable answer to a question involving the scales of Justice, in which he responded that the reason the lady in the statue had her eyes closed was because she didn't want to see how badly the butcher was ripping her off). The boys then invited the headmaster who'd administered the test over to their apartment, where they proceeded to give them a test of their own (one of the questions asked how many people could sleep in a two-bedroom apartment, which the headmaster got wrong because he'd failed to take into consideration the person sleeping in the bathtub). I thought long and hard about the basic structure of the episode, then realized that although the show's central premise was far different

from anything currently on television, the episode itself—an inoffensive twist on turning the tables—was easily recyclable.

I wrote an episode for a black show that had several teenagers as cast members and, using the basic plot structure, was able to give a fresh spin to the *Diff'rent Strokes* episode that had been my inspiration. I didn't use the exact same jokes, or even the same exact premise; in my spec, the teenager in question didn't have the benefit of a father with a chummy relationship with the headmaster in question, so she (I also made the character in question a girl) had to be a great deal more resourceful. But the structure and underlying theme worked, and I found that the actual writing—once I understood the show's overall rhythms and characters' voices—went surprisingly smoothly.

Once I was finished, I culled together every imaginable contact I had—which was only a few, since most of my friends, like me, were recent graduates—and sent out my script. It took a few months, but eventually one of my friend's cousins got it to a friend of his girlfriend's family who worked in the mailroom of a big agency and was looking for a way to cut to the front of the line. My script turned out to provide precisely that; the agency employee got my script into the hands of the executive producer of a major network show (also known as the "showrunner," and the most important person in charge of hiring new writers for any given show), who loved it. Great! I thought. Only one thing: now I had to pitch some original ideas.

I racked my brain, then squeezed and pummeled it some more until I had three episode ideas. Then I went in for my meeting and pitched away as the executive producer sat and stared at me for what felt like an eternity... or at least for a great deal longer than the standard twenty-two minutes of airtime taken up by a standard sitcom episode. Finally he spoke.

"It all sounds so... complicated," he said.

I was silent. Clearly I'd blown it. I mumbled a "thank you" and started to collect my things.

He gave me a quizzical look. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home," I said. "Obviously I didn't give you what you were looking for."

He laughed. "That's because you're working way too hard, kid. Sit down."

I did. He stood up and walked over to a bulletin board, upon which were written episode ideas for the show. "See this board? These are the thirteen episodes we're gonna air by December. Mind you, they got here only after we pitched about a hundred episodes that the network wouldn't allow us to air. Wanna know why?"

I shook my head. He continued. "They were too... I believe the word they used was 'unfamiliar.' Which was what I liked about your spec; sure you nailed the voices and the funny of it all, but above all else it felt familiar."

I relaxed and told him the story about how I'd come up with the idea for the episode. He smiled and nodded his head.

"Kid, you're gonna do just fine in this business."

Ten years later, it turns out he was right.

Although there is no such thing as a "typical" story when it comes to breaking into the industry, this writer's experience is as good an example as any to illustrate the quirky nature of the business.

Building an Episode From the Ground Up

As helpful as these templates are, you might still want to craft a series of original, specific circumstances for a show's characters. So if that's the case, what kinds of things do you need to be aware of—questions to ask, blind spots to avoid—so that your script will stand out from the pack? Below are some tips to assure that you won't get disqualified in the conceptual stage.

- 1. Make sure it's characteristic:** Let's say you've figured out a series of zany circumstances around a plot wrinkle that feels like a slam dunk to you. The first question you'd have to ask yourself is this: is it something the show's character would do? Your research must involve watching the show enough times to ensure that you're familiar with its characters' traits. Keep in mind that even though the term "sitcom" is short for "situation comedy," characters and their motivations must prevail over plot machinations.
- 2. Is the simplicity implicit?** Sitcom plots are fairly simple. A problem arises due to something one of the characters does or says, then that problem is resolved. You want to make sure that the problem in question is one that can be addressed completely in the span of twenty-two

minutes. If the plot feels like something longer, something that requires the use of excessive narrative devices, long set-ups and payoffs, or twists and turns, then it is probably not the right choice for your spec.

3. **Funny is money:** Does the situation you'd like to use for the basis of your script make you laugh when you think about it? Do you see infinite opportunities for humorous angles for the characters to explore? Are the jokes flying off the page before you've so much as set pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard)? Concocting a plot in which Johnny goes to make a bank deposit, only to find that the bank is closed, probably isn't going to work as the underlying basis for a sitcom spec; long gone are the days of *Leave It To Beaver*, in which a broken screen door was sufficient plot fodder for an entire twenty-two minute episode (perhaps a slight exaggeration, but the sitcoms of the '50s weren't known for their complex character dilemmas). Even though you assume that the characters will be full of their standard wit and aplomb when it comes time to write their dialogue, the situation itself should still bear some comic chuckles.
4. **A "B" story will help yield grade A product:** If you've watched most sitcoms, you'll notice that in addition to the main story that creates the vast majority of the conflict, there's often another, smaller side story as well that's usually unrelated to the main story. Side, or "B" stories (the one that forms the basis for the episode is called the "A" story) make the episode feel fuller and give the characters something else to do; the practice is similar to the way comic books employ smaller, margin comic strips to tell separate, smaller stories that involve lesser themes and resolutions. Say for example you wanted to write a spec episode of *Scrubs* in which J.D. (the show's protagonist, played by Zach Braff) was faced with a major medical dilemma that involved a patient's welfare versus that of the hospital for which he worked. You would want to counterbalance that with a "B" story, which would involve fewer beats than the "A" story with J.D.-something like a story in which Elliot (the attractive intern played by Sarah Chalke) starts to feel the beginning symptoms of every ailment her patients have would suffice, and would be easily resolved in a few beats.

Sitcom Structure

CHAPTER 3

Okay, so you've chosen your idea. You can just hear the droll witticisms rolling off the tongues of the show's characters, and you can't wait to subject them to the hilarious set of circumstances you've cooked up for them. The next step is to break down the episode's structure, guide your characters through the complications, and help them emerge at the other end.

Outlining

Before you write so much as the title page, you should construct an outline that details the episode's major plot points. Outlines written by staff writers that ultimately air on TV can be several pages long, single-spaced, with every joke and gag written down practically as it would appear onscreen. However, for the purposes of writing a spec script, you don't need to go to such lengths; a few bullet points per scene should be sufficient.

For example, say you wanted to write a spec episode of *Malcolm in the Middle* where Reese, Malcolm's troubled older brother, discovers that he has a hidden gift for interior decorating. You also wish to establish that Reese is dating a girl (one you'd create for the purposes of the spec episode) who is every bit as narrow-minded as she is gorgeous and loves Reese's manlier qualities. Let's also establish that Malcolm has a crush on this girl, whom we'll name Amber. Then, to top it all off, let's create a "B" story in which Lois is assigned to work the PA system at the Lucky Aide. The setting is now ripe for our spec episode outline, which should look something like this:

ACT ONE

Scene A

INT. LUCKY AIDE – DAY: Malcolm's mother, Lois, is approached by her manager, says he just fired the girl who does the P.A. for being pregnant. Lois: but it's against the law. Besides, she's your mistress. Manager: which is why this works in my favor. Sexual harassment's an easier court victory than sexual discrimination. Manager hands Lois the microphone, tells her she's on.

Scene B

INT. MALCOLM'S HOUSE – DAY: Reese with his new girlfriend, AMBER, who's a few garage sales away from being the sharpest tool in the shed.

Amber rubbing Reese's muscles as he tells her his latest tales of wrongdoing. Kisses him, then promises she'll be back for more. Malcolm enters as she's walking out; clearly has the hots for her. Reese sneers; in your wildest and wettest dreams, kid brother. Reese stands up, starts out. Malcolm: where are you going? Reese: kid down the block got a new electric scooter. Figured I'd go repurpose the motor for our rowboat.

Scene C

INT. LUCKY AIDE – DAY: Lois at her P.A. post at the Lucky Aide, bored out of her mind as she vacuously announces various specials on various aisles. Suddenly spots a couple of kids pounding on each other. Gets carried away and starts "calling" it, WWF-style.

Scene D

INT. MALCOLM'S HOUSE – DAY: Malcolm in the house, phone rings. It's for Reese; the woman wants to leave a message. Says the living room came out great and now she wants him to decorate her solarium. Malcolm hangs up, smiles; he's got the drop on Reese... big time.

ACT TWO

Scene E

INT. MALCOLM'S HOUSE – NIGHT: Malcolm, Reese, et al at the dinner table. Malcolm dropping hints all over the place—"pass the divan... I mean, Dijon mustard," etc. Reese narrows his eyes, suspects something's up.

Scene F

INT. MALCOLM'S BEDROOM – NIGHT: Malcolm on his bed. Reese enters, accuses Malcolm of spying on him. The jig is up; he admits his secret "gift," says that he's making great money and splurging on Amber, but she'd drop him like a bad cold if she knew the source. Reese appeals to Malcolm's benevolence; Malcolm, despite his hormones, agrees to keep his mouth shut.

Scene G

INT. LUCKY AIDE – DAY: We see Lois really getting into her P.A. duties—doling out unsolicited advice to mothers, flirting with good-looking single men, etc. Her manager is apoplectic at her behavior, but doesn't know what to do; not only does he not have a replacement, she's actually bringing in extra business thanks to her pluckiness.

Scene H

INT. CAFE VENITA – NIGHT: Reese and Amber at dinner at a fancy restaurant. Amber suggests that this could be “the night.” Reese about to explode when he’s approached by the fey maitre d’, who asks Reese if he could take a look at his condo; apparently the word is out in the community about Reese’s skills. The whole (not so) ugly truth comes out; Amber, put off (she breathily huffs: “how come the wife is always the last to know?”) nonetheless still proclaims her love for Reese... until a tattoo-sporting busboy winks at her, and she excuses herself to go feel his muscles.

Scene I

INT. MALCOLM’S HOUSE – NIGHT: Reese eating a pint of ice cream by himself, alone. Malcolm enters. Reese tells Malcolm what went down, thanks him for keeping his mouth shut. Reese: guess I’m just a pansy. Malcolm: being yourself doesn’t necessarily mean being a one-dimensional stereotype. Reese thinks about it: “in other words, I can thank you for keeping my secret but still put itching powder in your bed on a nightly basis?” Malcolm, realizing that his big brother is just being himself, nods—albeit a bit warily.

Tag

Lois at the Lucky Aide, negotiating a raise for herself... over the P.A. system, to the delight of the shoppers who break out in applause when she gets her raise.

Outline Analysis

Note that our outline is concise while still permitting for the occasional joke to be fleshed out in its body. We divided our spec episode into two acts, and each act into scenes (ten in all, counting the “tag”—a kind of sitcom epilogue, usually played out over the end credits). As far as why certain plot and character choices were made, see below.

ACT ONE

Establishing conflict

One of the first questions you must ask yourself when you’re writing your spec is, “Whose story is this?” Conflict is drama (and for the purposes of this analysis, comedy and drama are not mutually exclusive). In order to

maximize the conflict, it is important to establish a dilemma for the character whose story it is, because every episode of television is ultimately about one character's dilemma, and the choices they make to get themselves out of it. Therefore, the first act sets up the dilemma that will play out in the ensuing scenes.

So in our *Malcolm* episode above, whose story is it? You might be tempted to say that it's Reese's, since he's the one around whom the action revolves. Yet the story truly belongs to Malcolm (which, even though he is the star of the show, need not be the case for every episode), since he is the one facing the dilemma of whether or not to spill the beans about his brother. What creates the dilemma for Malcolm, aside from his inherent issues with his brother, is the fact that he very much would like to be the one going out with Amber. Thus Malcolm is forced to choose between his brother's request to keep his proclivities secret and his own selfish desires.

The "Hey Mae"

Because a sitcom is broken down into two acts divided by a commercial break, the end of the first act is where you need to have a "cliffhanger" beat that makes the viewer want to come back after the commercial to see how the episode will end (as opposed to changing the channel and thus costing the network ratings). This is unofficially known throughout the industry as a "Hey Mae"—as in, "Hey Mae, you gotta get in here and see what's going on with this show!" (ideally, the preceding is spoken with a strong Midwestern inflection and is followed by a "hyuk, hyuk!") Condensing though this stereotype may be (surely not every male Midwesterner is married to a mutton-chop cooking, pie-baking woman named Mae) it nonetheless stresses the importance of creating desire on the viewer's part to see how the episode resolves.

ACT TWO

Resolution

If the first act's primary importance is to set up the dilemma at the core of the episode, the second act exists to resolve it. The characters must ponder the situation they've gotten themselves in, then ultimately navigate their way out. Because if the basis for comedy is the recognition that we all get into pickles like these, then the pathos that endears these characters to us is their resourcefulness we'd all like to think we are capable of. And yet gone are the days of *Father Knows Best* and *The Brady Bunch*, when resolving a problem

meant little more than sitting down on dad's lap and letting him sagely explain the answers to all your problems (which, more often than not, were of the "aw shucks" variety). Today's characters deal with modern, real problems, and thus tend to be more complex, so their resolutions must feel like authentic fixes to both their situation and themselves. For example, Bernie Mac would not resolve a problem with his wife by getting down on his knees, crying and begging for her forgiveness; this might be a perfectly valid way for some other character in a different show to get himself out of a sticky situation, but it isn't true to the one Bernie Mac plays and it would be a tonal violation of his edgy show.

The moral of the story

Inasmuch as sitcoms—like all comedy—are primarily morality plays told with laughs, your story should have a point or theme—a conclusion for the characters to arrive at—without being overly preachy or obvious about it. Though a few exceptions exist (*Curb Your Enthusiasm* manages to uphold the mantra Larry David first established with *Seinfeld* of "no hugging, no learning"), most network sitcoms tend to have their characters figure something out by the end of the half-hour. And yet there still must be room left for them to continue making characteristic mistakes, or else there will be no future episodes of the show. It is thus important to teach them small, individual lessons that pertain to the events of the episode, but not big, sweeping values that change them for good. You wouldn't have a character on *Scrubs*, when faced with some of the less-appealing aspects of the medical business, quit his job as an intern, shave his head and declare himself a Hare Krishna; instead, he would address the dilemma and hold his moral ground, only the audience would know that the character is now a bit wiser for having had his experience.

Scene Breakdown

Though the number of scenes you ultimately choose to tell your story is not terrifically important, it is crucial that each scene have a reason for being there. So with that in mind, and using the guidelines set forth above, let's break down the scenes in our spec *Malcolm* outline and explain just how each one establishes something important about either the characters or the plot, or both.

- **Scene A:** Establishes the situation at the root of the “B” story (which can, and very often does come before the “A” story as a means of easing your way into the episode).
- **Scene B:** Establishes not only the girlfriend, but her qualifications for being with Reese. Also establishes Malcolm’s lust for her as well as Reese’s contemptuous superiority to Malcolm, which will further stoke Malcolm’s ultimate dilemma.
- **Scene C:** Provides the first “wrinkle,” or major plot development in the “B” story that will set the stage for Lois’ ultimate triumph over her jerk of a boss.
- **Scene D:** Reese’s secret is revealed to Malcolm, thus providing Malcolm with the dilemma at the core of the episode—the “Hey Mae,” as specified previously.
- **Scene E:** Establishes to Reese that Malcolm knows his secret, and thus the ground is set for a major confrontation between the two brothers.
- **Scene F:** The confrontation. Reese is forced to be humble, which in turn prompts Malcolm to choose his brother’s well-being over his own. Characters in sitcoms can be flawed, but never unsympathetic; difficult or unrealistic though it may be, they must ultimately always make the right, or at least the most sympathetic, decisions.
- **Scene G:** Lois has officially turned the tables on her boss; we see how her character’s resourceful, brash personality has taken a situation stinging of sour lemons and turned it into the proverbial, sweet lemonade.
- **Scene H:** Establishes that Reese’s hubris has gotten the better of him; in an effort to impress his impressionable girlfriend, he has taken her to a fancy restaurant that will, ironically, expose the unpalatable means that have made his high-class wooing of Amber possible in the first place. Amber proves herself to be the phony that everyone—save for the hormonally-driven Reese and Malcolm—knew her to be.
- **Scene I:** The reconciliation. Malcolm and Reese expound upon the episode’s themes: that blood is thicker than water, and that to thine own self one must be true. And, to that end, Reese will still go on antagonizing Malcolm.
- **Tag:** Little more than the final coda to the “B” story; if Lois is going to get a raise in the end, it is only fitting that we see her get it via her newfound platform.

Writing The Funny

Chances are you're something of a natural, comedically-speaking, if you're interested in writing a sitcom in the first place. And yet translating an ability to garner laughs at cocktail parties into well-crafted jokes and gags on the page is a craft in and of itself. Below are some tips on how to funnel your comic sensibility into your spec.

- 1. Write what you know:** It's a safe bet that the more personally invested you are in what you're writing, the more real and, by extension, funny it will be. If truth is stranger than fiction, it's also much funnier as well (as the case study at the end of this section will prove). Much of what you write will be constructed jokes and will therefore feel a bit forced at times (nobody in real life speaks in constant one-liners the way sitcom characters tend to). However, there are opportunities in every well-written show for your comic take on the universe to seep in; you should try to take every opportunity to filter your own experiences through those of the characters on the show, and to make them reflect your unique point of view. To wit, Larry David, co-creator of *Seinfeld*, had struggled as a stand-up comic for years and had actually worked as a bra salesman at one point in order to support his craft; this gig, like so many others he'd been forced to take, found its way onto the show along with several other workplace absurdities—one of the many reasons why *Seinfeld* seemed to draw from an inexhaustible source of comic primary source material.
- 2. Joke-logy 101:** As a rule, try to end your joke on the funny part of the sentence. If your character's line is "No can do; anchovies give me indigestion—like marriage," the word "marriage" is the laugh line. You wouldn't want to write, "No can do; anchovies and marriage give me indigestion" because the comparison you're making—as well as the laugh—would get lost in middle of the character's line. A good example of such a joke would be Woody Allen's famous utterance "Once I mate, I mate for life—like pigeons, and Catholics." Again, the joke word is "Catholics," and the comedy derives from Allen's juxtaposition of "Catholics" alongside the word "pigeons;" they aren't compatible terms, which is what makes the joke funny... but only if "Catholics" follows "pigeons" in the sentence.
- 3. "First-cousin" the joke:** In general, it's a good idea to let the audience do a little work to figure out the joke—in other words, write a line that's the "first cousin" of the joke rather than the direct relation. Take for example a scene from *Roseanne* in which Darlene's friend was being

uncharacteristically cryptic about an impending date. Darlene, Roseanne's eye-rolling, sarcastic daughter pretended to lean into a microphone and proceeded to crack: "Uh, Pat? For five hundred I'd like to solve the puzzle." This is a more indirect way of saying "enough with the stupid clues already," which if said explicitly wouldn't be especially funny. But, when "first-cousin," it becomes a pretty decent joke. Another good example of a "first-cousin" joke occurred during an episode of *Will and Grace*, when a somewhat oblivious guest character answered a question with a completely inappropriate remark. The main character turned to the befuddled questioner and said "You should see him count toothpicks sometime." The point being that the oblivious character is something of a Rain Man-type, but again it is funnier to let the audience make this connection in their heads rather than supply it explicitly for them.

4. **Study successful joke structure:** When something makes you laugh, it's not enough to chuckle and say "that's funny." You're trying to replicate what works, and in order to do this you must figure out why things are funny. Some gags so perfectly structured that you could borrow said structure and plug in a different situation with a different payoff; take a gag on *Cheers* in which Kelsey Grammer's barfly psychologist character, Frasier Crane (a character so beloved he was the subject of his own highly successful sitcom spin-off), discusses a psychic's shortcomings, concluding that the person's a witch doctor who will make shortsighted character judgments and run off with your money at the end of the day. Carla, the sharp-tongued barmaid, questions: "How is that any different from what you do?" To which Frasier replies, after thinking about it: "I can prescribe drugs." If you break this gag down to its essential components, you will discover the following structure at the root of it: Character A makes an observation about something outlandish. Character B then compares the outlandish scenario to Character A's profession, at which point Character A offers forth a weak distinction between the two—which is funny.
5. **Characters are funny:** Just like in real-life situations, in which "you had to be there," the more intimately familiar you are with a character and his peccadilloes, the funnier he tends to be. And because the peccadilloes of sitcom characters are known to millions, there is a good chance that your reader will be "there," so to speak. For example, is a character so pathologically obstinate (like Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners*) that he will insist on following his own unsound leanings against the advice of his spouse? Is a character so out-to-lunch (like Woody in

Cheers, himself an archetypal retread, of sorts, of the earlier Coach character, who himself owed a tip of the hat to the spaced-out Reverend Jim in *Taxi*) that he's always a beat behind? Occasionally a character is coming from so far out of left field as to seem alien, like the lovably lunar Kramer from *Seinfeld*—who was reportedly based on a neighbor of Larry David's who seemed to stay at home all day without a viable means of income—as a result, Kramer got away with everything from constant unannounced visits to getting Jerry banned from his favorite fruit stand. Or the case of an exceptionally strong dynamic between two characters, as in the married couple of *Mad about You*, becomes a perfect example of how sometimes you don't need to rely on general gag structure or joke-ology to turn out a comically dazzling piece of work.

Case Study: Stumbling Onto a Spec to Start a Career

In 1992 I found myself fresh out of film school, broke, and holding nothing of any value whatsoever; all I could think about was that film school had a: been primarily about film, and b: hasn't taken into consideration the fact that some of us might actually want to work upon graduation. As a fledgling television writer, I'd written a spec *Roseanne* and a spec *Seinfeld*, but neither of them had managed to catch fire with the agents to whom I'd showed them. The agents felt that, overall, the scripts were well-constructed, but just that—constructed, and not any better than the typical fare that tended to cross their desks on any given day. I didn't have any other ideas and felt that I'd pretty much shot my wad with the first two scripts.

Then, as luck would have it, I was sitting home one night when I happened to catch the pilot episode of *Mad about You*, a new show starring Paul Reiser and Helen Hunt. The show would subsequently go on to enjoy a successful multi-year run, which if I'd known then wouldn't have surprised me in the least; it was a refreshingly funny, honest take on the trials and tribulations of a newly-married couple. And as I had just gotten engaged, it was a natural ground-floor situation for me to explore further in my own writing.

As the show had just premiered, I figured that it would be a good few months before a glut of *Mad About You* specs found their way onto the desks of agents and showrunners. Thinking back to a weekend in New York in which a freak snowstorm had rendered my fiancée and me apartment-bound for an entire weekend, I outlined an episode in

which Paul and Jamie (the characters played by Reiser and Hunt) found themselves in a similar situation—right at the onset of their marriage. In an homage to Jean-Paul Sartre, I titled the episode *No Exit*, dashed it out, and sent it off to the last two agents I could get on the phone who weren't yet convinced that I was a complete, unredeemable hack.

Needless to say, I was thrilled when both agents called me the Monday after they'd read it (most reading is done over the weekend) and said that they wanted to represent me. Their enthusiasm was based on the level of the comedy, which they felt reflected not only "serious funny" (a term no one in Hollywood seems to find oxymoronic in the least) but also worldview—a rare feat in the sitcom world, where the characters are created by people other than you. I met with both agents, then chose the one who seemed more passionate about the script and eager to get me staffed on a show.

Within weeks I was taking meetings with network executives and studio executives, many of whom were young and either newly married or engaged. They echoed my agent's sentiments about how "real" the script felt, and thought that its comic observations were spot on. With their recommendations—and thanks to some great hustle on the part of my agent—I was sent out to meet the showrunners of virtually every sitcom that got a pickup that season, and I wound up with a job on *Murphy Brown*. So to this day—thirteen years later—I have my plucky fiancée (now wife) to thank for what has thus far been a fun, satisfying career.

Other Considerations

- Your entire script should run between 50 and 60 pages (roughly two pages per minute), which means that each act should be about 25 to 30 pages long. Your scenes should be short, sweet, and to the point; keep the banter snappy and the speeches few in number and brief in length. Nowhere is the phrase "economy is king" more true than in the sitcom medium, where no character ever says more than they need to... and nothing at all if it isn't funny by itself or at least leading to something that is funny.
- Though there is an old adage that a sitcom script should have two jokes per page, this is not by any means a rule; you might go an entire page at times with only one joke, or no jokes at all. Conversely, it is entirely possible to be too jokey; ideally you'd like to find that balance where your characters

are still saying funny things but aren't acting like they're waiting for a rimshot.

- As evidenced in our *Malcolm* outline, the episode's resolution should come from a place of genuine sentiment, but should always dovetail back into something funny. The characters learn something, but at the end of the day they're still the funny, outrageous creatures we know and love them to be. Thus you want to ensure that they have learned somewhat, but not too much; they have to come back next week prepared to go through a whole new set of mishaps that come from the same, unresolved holes in their characters' imperfect psyches.
- You might notice the names of two writers sharing the "written by" credit on sitcoms, which means that the episode in question was the work of a writing partnership. More often than not, sitcom writers work in two-writer teams due to the sheer amount of humor required by the medium. While you shouldn't automatically assume you'll need a partner and shouldn't go about finding one in a purely mercenary fashion (by taking out an ad or scouring film schools for disgruntled would-be comics), you should always be open to a partnership should the right person come along. Every partnership is different; sometimes one writer is in charge of jokes while the other is in charge of story, while other partnerships involve both writers volleying every line of dialogue back and forth until they feel they have it right. As with any relationship, it is important not to let the dynamics involved supersede the work; the ultimate goal at all times should be the best possible script, not the appeasement of either writer's ego.
- Some writers have found success breaking into sitcoms with original "spec pilots" or humorous—and, in many cases, unpublished—short stories. While samples like these can sometimes provide a respite for would-be employers from the enormous pile of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* spec episodes they're staring down, it is nonetheless important to remember that original work can also backfire on you. Because television is such a copycat medium in a way (writers tend to stand out by mimicking the voices of the show's characters, not, at least initially, by creating their own) you might have a hard time getting a job without providing any indication that you know how to write for existing shows. So feel free to put forth an original piece of work... but have a backup *Malcolm in the Middle* or *Will and Grace* ready to go just in case.

Breakdowns of Classic Sitcom Episodes

1. "Cheers"—Episode Title: "Relief Bartender"/Original Airdate: 3/27/86

The sitcom *Cheers* almost didn't make it to classic status. In fact, it barely made it to its second season; at the end of its first season, it ranked eighty-second out of eighty-four network shows. But the support of then-NBC president Brandon Tartikoff combined with winning a slew of surprise Emmys garnered it a renewal that couldn't have been better-timed, as that year the NBC powerhouse sitcom *The Cosby Show* debuted and promptly anchored a Thursday night lineup in which *Cosby*, *Cheers*, and the 8:30 show—*Family Ties*—ranked in the top five shows in the country week after week.

Cheers benefited from more than good timing and a smart executive, however. Its writing staff was culled from some of television's williest—and funniest—veteran sitcom writers who brought a wealth of experience and worldview to a show that, on the surface at least, seemed to be about little more than a bunch of bar regulars in Boston. But the inhabitants of Sam Malone's pub were a surrogate family to each other, from charming, if at times ineffectual and not terribly bright father figure Sam and his love/hate relationship with blonde, pretentious but good-hearted Diane, to the tart, frequently-pregnant, tough-love mother figure Carla, and the dumb but loyal goofball bartender, first realized in the character of dizzy uncle-type Coach and later replaced by lovable but even dizzier kid-brother-type Woody. These characters ran the roost of bar patrons and assorted long-winded sorts that comprised the show.

Never was this familial dynamic more evident than in an episode in which Sam decided to "come out from behind the bar" and play owner/host. He hired another bartender and, in cheesy "host" lingo, started greeting guests at the door (one of whom told him she'd give him five dollars if he'd just go away). Sam's mishaps hit a crescendo toward the end of Act One, when he booked a bachelor party—a "coup" for which he laid out an extensive spread and bragged about incessantly to Carla and Diane... until the party revealed itself to be three people in number. The act ended there, as Sam realized that the whole host routine simply wasn't working.

And this was where the dilemma kicked in. Sam had hired another bartender, Rob, a diligent worker who was respectful of his boss, and who had a wife and two children at home. Woody, on the other hand,

was every bit as loyal an employee as well as a favorite with the regulars, but had no family at home. So Sam found himself stuck between the proverbial rock and the even more proverbially discouraging hard place. Forced to make a decision that would either make him unpopular with the regulars or a heel in his own mind, he opted for the former and fired Woody, who took it badly. Woody informed Sam that the gang at Cheers was pretty much all the family he had, and that he was heartbroken. Sam felt his pain, and cursed himself for his hubris in allowing himself to be put in such a situation in the first place.

Just as it seemed that Sam was stuck with a permanent decision that would throw off the well-calibrated balance of his bar's populace, however, Rob burst into his office with the news that he'd landed a fantastic gig—one that would pay him three times what he was earning as a bartender. Sam was ecstatic—things could go back to normal, and Woody could have his old job back. But Woody was still put-off that he could be treated in so mercenary a fashion, and wanted a raise—apparently he wasn't such a rube after all. Sam agreed, but then Woody revealed that he wanted an additional two hundred a week. He and Sam haggled, and Sam told him that it was a hundred bucks a week—take it or leave it. Woody thought about it, then said that on account of this being a family-type environment—the only one he'd ever known—he'd be happy to come back for five hundred bucks a month... a sum to which the slow-thinking Sam was only too happy to agree.

This episode of *Cheers*, in addition to its hysterical gags (the doomed bachelor party begins with the party's "leader" sticking his head in, then calling back up to his friends, announcing: "Come on in, guys—looks clean"), establishes a terrific dilemma for Sam, then manages to get him out of it. The ultimate reveal that saves the day—in this case, Rob's landing a job—is a good, unpredictable twist, and just when we think that Sam's gotten himself out of it completely unscathed, Woody manages to hold him up for some extra cash. The moral of the story is that vanity—Sam's decision to become more of a personality—never leads to good, and even though we're rooting for Sam to extract himself from this mess, it won't come without some cost. Thus did the writers put forth an episode that succeeds across the board: it's funny, well-plotted, and addresses a theme that is organic to its main character.

2. *Taxi*—Episode Title: “Tony’s Sister And Jim”/Original Airdate: 11/26/80

The sitcom *Taxi* is, along with *All In The Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* considered to be one of the greats from the 1970s, the golden era of television comedy. Small wonder, since its creator, James L. Brooks, was the mind behind *Mary Tyler Moore* and would go on to co-create *The Simpsons* (several of the *Taxi* writers would go on to similarly illustrious careers, including Glen and Les Charles, who created *Cheers*). *Taxi* took a gritty ground-floor situation that, like *Cheers*, was largely populated by unsuccessful people (Judd Hirsch’s character Alex Rieger, the central character or “glue” of the show, remarked in the pilot episode that one of the cabbies was really an actor, one was really a boxer, and one was really a museum curator. Only he, Alex, was really a cabbie).

Taxi was one of the first shows to push the envelope as far as eccentric characters were concerned. Louie, the diminutive, antagonistic manager of the taxi company, was gleefully unsympathetic—a reversal of the “heart of gold” stereotype (if there truly had been any gold in Louie’s heart, he would gladly have mined it and pawned it for twenty bucks). Latka Gravas, the mechanic played by Andy Kaufman (who was the subject of the biopic *Man In The Moon* starring Jim Carrey), was more than just a “cute foreign guy” who spoke a language that no one had ever heard (and that Kaufman seemed to be making up as he went along) — he was also a little strange, as evidenced by an episode in which he actually morphed into his swinging alter-ego, Vic Ferrari. And *The Reverend* Jim Ignatowski, played to skull-shocked perfection by Christopher Lloyd, was a drugged-out casualty of the Sixties who remained about a beat and a half behind any given conversation. Along with Judd Hirsch, Tony Danza, Marilu Henner, and Jeff Conaway (with a brief pit-stop in the first season from Randall Carver), they comprised one of the best ensembles ever on TV.

There are so many classic episodes of *Taxi* that practically any one could serve as a quintessential example of how to write a sitcom. However, an episode featuring Tony’s sister (played by Marge Simpson voice-over artist and *Rhoda* alum Julie Kavner) stands out as a particularly good example of how to incorporate hilarious situations and unexpected plot twists at the service of the show’s characters. Tony, the good-hearted, none-too-bright boxer played by Tony Danza, announces that his sister is coming to visit and that she has crummy taste in men. Therefore, he’d like Alex to take her out... even going

so far to add that he's perfectly okay with the notion of them sleeping together. Latka also appeals to Tony's matchmaking instincts, but Tony turns him down.

Upon arrival, Tony's sister promptly encounters Louie, whose identity she manages to guess when he tries to charge her a dollar in exchange for telling her where she can find Tony. She then crosses paths with Latka, who berates her brother for denying them the opportunity to sleep together. But then instead of getting a chance to meet Alex, she crosses paths with Jim, who's as spacey as ever (in response to being asked if he's ever been to Spokane, where she's from, he says "Me? No." then, thinking about it further, adds: "Eh, wait a minute... I was born there!"). A hilarious scene ensues, leading to Jim asking her out on a date, and the two subsequently start to see each other—but behind Tony's back; Tony is emotional and overprotective of his sister, plus he thinks that Jim is a burned-out loser to boot. Alex knows that Jim and Tony's sister have been seeing each other, and thus finds himself in a dilemma—should he keep the relationship secret and be dishonest to his friend, or should he spill the beans knowing full well how Tony feels about Jim?

Ultimately Alex feels he must tell Tony the truth. Tony becomes enraged—his worst fears have been confirmed about his sister's taste in men, and he storms over to the apartment where she's staying and finds the two of them sitting on the couch together. Tony promptly lifts Jim up by the jacket and seat of his pants and threatens to throw him out—literally. Tony's sister confronts him, saying that he always allows his emotions to get the better of him. Standing there, holding Jim in mid-air (a horizontally aloft Jim memorably tells Tony: "Do you know how ridiculous you look right now?"), Tony reconsiders his actions and puts Jim down, at which point Jim informs everyone that they've all learned a valuable lesson: Tony has learned that he has to let the people he loves live their own lives, Tony's sister has learned that she can't control who she'll fall in love with, and Jim has learned—in his estimation—"the most important thing of all: I love being lifted!"

Although it may seem at first glance as though this particular episode's dilemma/problem rests with a marginal character (Alex), upon further examination we see that the story—and the core problem—is, indeed, Tony's. For a dilemma is only a core plot issue if the main character is able to benefit in the end, and ultimately it is Tony's decision to accept something that is anathema to him—in this case, an

underachieving sad-sack like Jim—that enables him to grow as a character in the end.

3. *Married With Children*—Episode Title: “A Man’s Castle”/Original Airdate: 2/17/91

On the lighter, less canonized side of sitcom history, the long-running hit *Married With Children* (thirteen seasons of hysterical insult humor) offered up a satirical take on the sitcom family. A direct response to the loving, nurturing homes depicted on the more mainstream *Cosby* and *Family Ties*, *Married With Children* gave us the failures of the Bundy family, whose bumbling, impotent patriarch Al was the antithesis of the *Father Knows Best* model put forth since television’s beginnings. Al’s misadventures—more often than not at the hands of his shrewish wife Peg, dimwitted, sluttish daughter Kelly, and sexually frustrated, undersized son Bud—struck a nerve with American fathers who hated their jobs, never seemed to have enough money, and found their home lives unsatisfactory on a good day. And nowhere was Al’s inability to exercise his will at home more evident than in an episode in which the perpetually bored, ceaselessly unproductive Peg decided to take a class in interior design.

The problem begins with Peg’s first homework assignment, in which she is told that she must redecorate a room in her own house. Al, who likes his house just the way it is, in all its shag-carpeted, brown glory, forbids her from following through on the assignment. Al then comes home one day to find that the house is... completely untouched. After trumpeting his victory over his wife, Al informs Bud that he is going to go and celebrate his victory “the way a man celebrates his victory.” Al then proceeds to pick up a newspaper, fold it under his arm, and head off to his personal sanctuary—his private bathroom in the garage. The second Al opens the door, however, he takes in a bathroom that has been entirely redecorated in pink touches and—in the coup de grace—now features a framed picture of Peg on the counter in plain view of the toilet seat.

Not a typical emotional dilemma, for sure, but one completely organic to the tone of a show in which a typical joke consisted of Peg telling Al that going out, even if to a party neither wanted to attend, still beat her usual Friday night fare of watching him and the dog play “don’t blame me, it was him.” And in the exaggeratedly lowbrow world of the Bundys, a situation in which a man’s wife makes his bathroom pink certainly constitutes a problem worthy of an act break. So when Act Two begins, we see Al imploring Peg to change the bathroom back;

not only does the décor give him the heebie-jeebies, but Peg has programmed his toilet to play “We’ve Only Just Begun” every time Al flushes it—which, being their wedding song, makes Al’s innards “freeze up.” But Peg is proud of the job she has done with Al’s bathroom, and in her usual, intractable style, refuses to change it back, leaving Al with no option but to go to a public toilet at a local gas station.

When Al arrives at the gas station, he is greeted by a long line of displaced dads—all holding folded-up newspapers and magazines—who are comparing their reasons for being there. Al informs them that his wife made the bathroom pink, and the men step aside and collectively usher him to the front of the line. However, any relief Al may have felt is short-lived, as a man finally emerges from the toilet and hangs an “Out Of Order” sign on the door. As the men grumble, then prepare to fold up their papers and move on to the next destination, Al finally breaks down. Holding his newspaper aloft like a rally sword, he announces that this is nonsense. “Look at us,” he yells. “Running, like a Frenchman from a cap gun.” Al announces that he, for one, is not going to take it anymore and turns and heads back to the Bundy home (while the men, unmoved, discuss other service station options).

Al enters the Bundy home, holding a bag of food, just in time to see Peg’s pretentious interior design teacher arrive with the rest of the class. Al implores Peg one last time to redo the bathroom, but Peg refuses, saying “What’s the worst thing you can do—marry me?” As Peg disappears upstairs, Al turns to the camera and smiles. “Then prepare to suffer the consequences.” Accompanied by the strains of George Thorogood and the Destroyers’ anthem “Bad To The Bone” (not to mention the enthusiastic cheers of the studio audience), Al removes a stack of burritos, beans, and hot sauce from the bag and starts stuffing the food into his mouth like a man possessed. Finally Al leans back and smiles—time to reclaim his turf. Al storms upstairs and disappears offscreen—there is a beat, then the students from the class start pouring down the stairs and proceed to exit, en masse, from the Bundy home. And as the episode fades to black over uproarious applause, an onscreen chyron informs us that: “The very next day, Al got his bathroom back.”

Again, the situations this show deals with are not quite comparable to those faced by the characters in *Taxi* and *Cheers*, but the material in *Married With Children* captures its characters’ underlying issues as effectively. Al’s never-ending—and in its own way, primal—crusade

to mark his territory, as it were, is very much one of the show's driving themes. And even though the writers of *Married With Children* opted to enact Al's problems in humorous, laughable fashion, those problems would not have been relatable in any way if they were simply cartoon exaggerations; somewhere at the root of Al's struggles lies the struggles of the typical American dad, a fact lost on critics who tried to write the show off as mere buffoonery.

Getting Started in Dramatic Writing

CHAPTER 4

Dramatic television has come a long way since the days of *Cannon* and *Hawaii Five-O*. Today's one-hour dramas feature some of the best writing of any entertainment-related medium and have diversified well beyond the standard cop shows, soaps, and mysteries of yesteryear. Which is not to say that those genres have disappeared, but they have morphed into much more fascinating, profound explorations of motive and character. Even the notion of castaways on an island has gotten a face-lift, evidenced ABC's hit series *Lost*. The 1970s are generally considered to be the golden age of the half-hour sitcom, but for the one-hour drama the time is now.

For aspiring writers whose dream it is to get a staff job on *The West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, or *Law And Order*, the objective is to write two "spec" scripts—sample episodes of existing shows so well-written that readers consider them worthy of airing. These spec scripts, more than a resume or curriculum vitae, will serve as your calling card when it comes time to try to procure work in the industry. Your goal should be to write two scripts that represent the full breadth of your writing abilities (or, if said abilities are best-suited to one particular type or style of show, two strong samples indicating such). As with the sitcom, dramatic television shows are comprised of writing staffs headed up by a head writer, or "showrunner" (most of the various "producers"—supervising, co-executive, etc.—are really just writers who have moved up in the hierarchy of the show). You will need to use your scripts to attract the interest of an agent (which we will discuss in greater detail in a later chapter), whose responsibility it will then be to send your scripts around town and get them read by the showrunners who make decisions about which writers they intend to hire to join the writing staff of their show.

Formatting

As with the sitcom, dramatic writing entails specific formatting requirements easily met through nearly all scriptwriting software sold via Internet, universities, and writer's specialty stores. Although it's highly recommended that you purchase one of these programs (Final Draft is the most popular program within the industry), it is not entirely necessary. If you are writing a script in a standard word-processing program, you will need to follow the formatting guidelines offered below.

Title pages

Before you so much as write the first page of your script, you should format a title page. This acts as a kind of book cover, stating the show's name, the title of the spec episode, and who it's written by. It should look something like this:

LAW AND ORDER

"Safe Haven"

by

My Name

You would then scroll down to the bottom right hand corner of the page and write your contact information -your street address, phone number (or numbers, if you wish to include your cell) and e-mail address. Some writers take the time to register their script with the Writer's Guild of America (the writer's union, which we'll get to in a later chapter). It is unlikely, however, that such lengths—while hardly expensive -are necessary at this juncture of your career; outright theft of original screenplays by any legitimate producers or agents is rarer than people think, and such theft of television spec scripts (especially of those written by largely unknown writers) is practically unheard of.

Getting started

The one-hour television drama officially begins, in virtually every instance, with the following words, which you should type at the very top of the page at the edge of the left margin:

FADE IN:

These two words are always capitalized and are always followed by a colon. Most screenwriting software is trained to recognize these words and will automatically capitalize them when they are typed in.

Page count and act breaks

Your basic dramatic spec script follows essentially the same rules as feature-length screenplays, in that one page translates into roughly one minute of screen time. And even though most one-hour dramas run fifty-two minutes due to commercials, the scripts tend to come in between fifty-five and sixty pages. Your script should fall within this rough page count; occasionally you can run a page or two over sixty (particularly if you have written a spec pilot—more on this later), but you don't want to exceed the sixty page count if you can help it.

Structurally speaking, most television dramas tend to be divided into four acts that are separated by three commercial breaks, with additional commercials placed after and before the opening and closing credits respectively (shows for pay cable stations such as HBO and Showtime do not require act breaks as there are no commercials). For the network and basic cable shows, act breaks are placed at the beginning of the act, in capital letters and at the top and center of the page, as indicated below:

ACT ONE

You would then go on to describe the setting, location, and time of day as provided in the following section.

Scene headings and narrative

A scene heading, which is also capitalized (and not, contrary to television formatting, underlined), describes where the action is taking place—interior or exterior—and offers an estimation as to what time of day the action is occurring. Placed two lines below and on the same page as the words “FADE IN” (or below the last line of the previous scene—some people and software use three lines), your scene heading will look something like this:

INT. SUPERMARKET – DAY

This lets the reader know the following:

- that the ensuing scene takes place in a supermarket...
- that it is an interior shot (INT.)...
- and that it occurs sometime during the day.

Some writers are more specific about the time of day in which the scene takes place, but this is generally not advised unless you have a good dramatic reason for it. Scene headings are always simply interior or exterior (INT. or EXT.), are abbreviated, and are once again in capital letters.

Let's say you wanted to have your character be in two separate but adjoining locations (one exterior, one interior) and have her move immediately from one of these locations to another. For example, say you wish to convey someone running up the driveway to a house and exiting the scene to go inside, then slowly making their way through that house. You would write two separate scene headings, the first of which would look something like this:

EXT. CHARACTER'S HOME – DAY

Then, after the character has exited inside, you would want to go inside. But you would also want to convey that although the setting has changed, the action is continuous. You would denote that fact by writing the following:

INT. CHARACTER'S HOME – CONTINUOUS

The capitalized word "CONTINUOUS" informs the reader that, although you have broken up the scene into two different locations, you intend for the action to continue without a significant break in the film's timeline.

Once you have established the where and when of the action, you are now officially inside the scene. And sometimes before you address what your characters are actually doing inside that scene, you'll want to create the atmosphere of the room; this will not only make the script more visual for the reader, it will give the scene its overall timbre. This device is called narration and is usually denoted by a non-indented single-spaced sentence or small paragraph two lines below the scene heading. Say, for example, you wanted to have the titular character from HBO's *The Sopranos* and his nephew Christopher pull up in front of a sausage warehouse by the docks of the Hudson river, en route to killing (or, in the show's parlance, "whacking") a former business associate who has fallen out of favor with the family. You could convey both the ominous backstory of the situation as well as the characters' attitudes toward their actions in the ensuing scene by writing the following:

EXT. SAUSAGE FACTORY – DAY

The red bricks, once so proud, seem to be crumbling a bit. Tony and Christopher pull up in Tony's truck, then hop out and look around for a moment, almost wistfully.

A beat. Then they turn to each other and, business being business, head up the steps to the doorway.

In five short lines we were able to set the mood of the scene while visually conveying some sense of what is about to ensue.

Dialogue

Once you've established the scene's overall setting and ambience, it's time to let the actors move your story and/or their characters' development along. Characters' names and their dialogue should appear, proportionally, in the middle of the page, not near the page's left margin as is sometimes perceived.

CHRISTOPHER
Place looks different.

TONY
Yeah, real shame.

Dialogue should only take place in the middle of the page as indicated above; it never runs from one margin to the other. Dialogue is also always single-spaced and follows the same grammatical rules as any other form of prose.

Say, for example, you wish to modify the dialogue with a command about the spirit in which the line is to be read. It is almost as though you are the director, helping the actor determine his or her motivation, only in this case the person to whom you are providing the direction is the reader, who now has a better take on what the character is getting at. You would write something like this:

TONY
(suddenly menacing)
Maybe I didn't make myself clear. We're not talking
about sausages anymore.

Tony's change of tone is noted in a parenthetical underneath his name, provided it isn't clear from the actual content of the dialogue. One mistake you don't want to make is to write too many of these stage directions; not only do they clutter the page unnecessarily, but after a while actors have been known to simply cross them out on principle.

If, however, you would like to have the character shift gears in the middle of a sentence—or make some sort of small gesture on the order of a hand wave, a look around, etc.—you would indicate it like this:

TONY
Who are we kidding here? You're no

St. Francis of Assisi. (leans forward)
Now all we gotta do is decide who
takes over when Johnny finally figures
out the price of the farm he bought.

If, however, Tony were to perform a more physical action that involved an actual piece of stage direction, you wouldn't place that stage direction in the body of the dialogue; you would instead separate it from the dialogue and give it its own line of narration.

TONY

So says Christopher. Me, I don't
know what to think anymore.

Tony stands up. Walks over to the door and locks it. Then turns around
and faces the men.

TONY

(cont'd)

Now I need all of you on the same
page. Anyone's got a problem with
what I'm saying, it stays in this
room. Understand?

Note that because no one else interjected between Tony's first line and his second, it is necessary to insert "cont'd"—the abbreviation for the stage direction "continued"—underneath Tony's name, centered, and in parentheses.

Genre

You probably already have the sense that certain shows fall into certain categories, which are known in television as "genres." Below are the basic television genres with which you should be familiar as you decide which shows you would like to write for. Bear in mind that you should try to write for as wide a spectrum of shows as possible; unless you only wish to be considered for the more sensationalistic, sudsy fare on TV, you shouldn't write spec episodes of both *The O.C.* and *Desperate Housewives*.

The genres, or types of shows you'll be considering writing, are:

- **The Soaps:** A standby whose roots go all the way back to *Peyton Place* as well as more recent forbearers like *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*, the nighttime soap opera is typically characterized by a situation involving money,

corruption, greed and lust. Aaron Spelling, the producer behind hit soaps from *The Love Boat* to *Dynasty*, even managed to use retool this formula with great success in such youth-driven soaps as *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Melrose Place*. The current crop ranges from the Fox hit *The O.C.* to the ABC phenomenon *Desperate Housewives*; but a show like *Lost* could even qualify as a soap due to its larger-than-life, serialized storyline. Although they inspire tremendous loyalty from their fans when they do hit (due largely to multi-year arcs in which viewers follow the growth and setbacks of their favorite characters), soaps tend to be relegated to “guilty pleasure” status by most writers who evaluate other writing samples, and as such tend not to make the most universally accepted writing samples. However, if this is where you are convinced your gifts as a writer lie, then by all means make it your business to write the juiciest, most luridly readable *Desperate Housewives* you can muster up.

- **The Cop Dramas:** Stuck for decades in the “Just the facts, ma’am” stoic woodenness of shows like *Dragnet* and *The Streets Of San Francisco*, the cop drama genre had a major rebirth when Steven Bochco (the subject of a later profile), a writer-producer who had written for shows like *Columbo*, decided to infuse the oeuvre with more character-driven material. The result, the initially low-rated but ultimately widely embraced show *Hill Street Blues* was nothing short of a groundswell. Writers and executives realized that the drama in the lives of the men and women who patrol our streets and protect our citizens could translate to compelling storylines and strong ratings. In later years, the moral ambiguities presented by the genre would explode with a healthy residual of shrapnel with FX’s *The Shield*, a show in which the phrase “good cop/bad cop” actually applied to the same character. Cop dramas, when they work, provide some of the best writing samples in town, and if you happen to be a big fan of the genre, there is no better sample to put forth.
- **The Thrillers:** A recent trend on TV has resulted in a spate of shows that feel almost like a two-hour thriller that you could see in the movie theater, only they’re divided into 22 hours. Shows like *24*, *Lost*, and the recent Fox entry *Prison Break* create labyrinthine worlds of tangled subplots, double crosses, twists and cliffhangers and intrigue galore. Concept-driven in theory, they nonetheless live and die on the basis of their characters’ complex actions and motivations. Although shows driven by these storytelling principles have been around for a while in one incarnation or another (the hit Sixties show *The Fugitive* comes to mind), they have become especially popular as of late, perhaps due to the explosion of show-related Internet web sites. They can be addictive as pure entertainment, but

usually don't provide the best opportunities for spec scripts due to the ongoing, overarching plotlines that are subject to change at any moment; you would hate to spend months writing a spec episode of *Lost* only to discover, upon completion, that the character for whom you'd designed the show had taken a radical turn that was inconsistent with your episode... or, worse yet, have that character die just as you were wrapping up your script.

- **The Procedurals:** Shows like *Law And Order* and *CSI* tend to come in bunches (both aforementioned shows are huge multi-night franchises for their respective networks). But don't mistake them for the cop dramas listed above; with the exception of *Without A Trace*, the Thursday night CBS hit that follows *CSI*, these shows tend to favor plot over character. They also tend to have self-contained storylines that begin and end with each episode, which differs from the multi-episodic storylines the characters in the cop dramas undergo. So does this mean you shouldn't write one as a spec? Absolutely not; procedurals are the new murder mystery, supplanting stodgy old models ranging from *The Rockford Files* to *Matlock*, and their often complex plots—while light on the characters who solve them—often involve the exploration of the multiple pathologies of mankind. And due to their burgeoning popularity (audiences just can't seem to digest enough different ways to solve crimes), the chances that you will be put up for one of these shoes is quite high. Thus if you have a yen for mystery storytelling, you'd be well-advised to start Tivo-ing every episode of *Cold Case* and *Law And Order* you can.
- **The Legal Serials:** Not quite soaps, but not quite on the dramatic level of the cop dramas either, the legal serials capitalize on the inherent suspense of a courtroom, and the toll that the profession's ethical dilemmas take on its members. The legal serial traces back to Steven Bochco's groundbreaking *L.A. Law*, which managed to create drama outside the courtroom that was every bit as compelling as the legal cases themselves. Since then, the genre has pretty much been dominated by Bochco protégé David E. Kelley, whose long-running *The Practice* earned a virtual monopoly on Emmy before the emergence of *The West Wing* (and has since been spun off into the current hit *Boston Legal*). These shows are keen to hire lawyers-cum-writers (Kelley himself was one), so if you have either worked as a lawyer or attended law school, a *Boston Legal* spec could be in your immediate future.
- **The Hospital Shows:** Since *St. Elsewhere*, it has become abundantly clear to network executives that shows taking place in hospitals are as inherently dramatic as those in police precincts and courtrooms. But the genre, which peaked dramatically with the #1 hit *ER*, and lesser, but in some ways superior David E. Kelley offering *Chicago Hope*, has become something of

a catch-all; shows like *Medical Investigation* explore the creepier side of medicine, while *Scrubs* is a downright yuk-fest. Still, fare like *Grey's Anatomy* and *House* have attempted—and succeeded—in picking up where their more ambitious forbearers left off; the suspense behind the circumstances of a patient's health, as well as their ultimate fate, give the episodes their plot content while the doctors who struggle to live and love amidst it all give the shows their character and fiber. And unlike the legal shows, hard knowledge of medicine is not a requirement for writing for one of these shows; you need to have a basic grasp of the technical terminology involved in whatever condition you choose to write about, but the characters' reactions—both patient and doctor—are what's really important.

- **The Emmy Candidates:** Some shows manage to break the mold and thus don't fit neatly into any particular genre. Not surprisingly, these shows tend to be the favorites year after year among the committees who determine Emmy nominations. Shows like *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing*, and *Nip/Tuck* manage to explore the complexity of their characters without necessarily always making them likeable or even wholly sympathetic in the end. Since there is no real formula to writing any of these, it's important to keep in mind that some of the inherent subtleties involved in such intricate characterization can be treacherous for the writer first starting out; even the industry's most seasoned, veteran writers have been known to stumble over the fine line that keeps their often-troubled characters from being completely unredeemable. But the challenge involved in tackling such a feat—often rewarded significantly by prospective readers because of the degree of difficulty factor—is so high that it is a risk well worth taking; these shows permit ample room for fresh perspectives and even black humor, qualities that aren't often present in spec scripts but that receive a warm reception when they are.
- **The Family Drama:** Shows like *Summerland* and *Seventh Heaven*, which are more often than not found on networks like the WB and ABC Family, share something in common with the soaps in that they tend to be immensely popular with their viewers. However, due to the lack of subtlety in their characters and storylines, family dramas tend to inspire little such response in potential readers. Unless you are convinced that you can move a reader to tears with a spec *Everwood*, you would best be advised to avoid writing any sample episodes in the family drama genre.
- **The Dramedy:** Dubbed thus due to the blend of drama and comedy that the show tends to achieve. Its most successful models are *Ally McBeal*, the more recent *Gilmore Girls* and the new Fox series *Head Cases*, in which the subject matter is light and the characters have fun, sometimes outrageous

points of view. This is a perfectly viable genre for which to write if you are convinced that the other genres will not make good use of your light touch; however, given that these shows comprise the vast minority of television's primetime schedule, you'd do yourself a disservice not to write at least one spec episode from the other more popular, prevalent genres.

Case Study: How Dick Wolf Created the Procedural

In 1990, Dick Wolf launched a cop show on NBC that received little to no fanfare from the network or any of the prominent television critics. Called *Law And Order*, it was a one-hour drama that explored a homicide case from both angles of due process: the police who cracked the case, and the district attorney's office in charge of prosecuting it in court. In an era of higher-volume, more outrageous series like *Moonlighting* and *L.A. Law*, the more buttoned-down *Law And Order* barely made a splash. Yet executives loved the no-nonsense, meat and potatoes show, and a loyal core of fans kept it on the air for years.

Then Wolf overhauled the cast, adding Broadway and film veterans Jerry Orbach and Sam Waterston and, perhaps even more importantly, brought on the first of what would ultimately become a series of tough-talking, sexy female D.A.'s. Although their sexuality was downplayed, the women added an interesting dimension to what had reflected all-too-accurately the old boy's networks of law and order, and now younger viewers and women alike tuned in to *Law And Order* in droves—thus ushering in a new era in which the police procedural all but killed off the mystery genre.

Several factors make the show especially appealing from a programming perspective. For starters, its completely episodic structure doesn't require a viewer to have any knowledge of the show's past; they can tune in to an episode, know exactly who the characters are and what roles they play, and be told a completely satisfying story that's over and done in the course of an hour. This self-contained quality shared by every episode is also a major factor in the show's popularity in syndication (it seems as though TNT could just as easily advertise hours in which they are not airing *Law And Order*, which seems to comprise half of that network's programming).

And above all else, the plot twists and reveals are surprising, dramatic, and worthy of water-cooler discussion, all of which have made *Law And Order* not only a multiple Emmy winner, but a franchise model that every network strives to copy.

Characters in Dramas

CHAPTER 5

Dramas, like sitcoms, are driven primarily by their characters. But dramas don't fall back on constant jokes and gags, so on the surface, dramas create a more natural sense of interaction among the characters. Genuine though they might seem, these relationships are actually the result of painstaking efforts on behalf of the shows' writers to create situations that are both dramatic and realistic—no small feat, considering the inherent lack of drama in everyday life. Dialogue and situations are carefully constructed and orchestrated so as to enable the characters to grow just a bit without completing their character arcs (and thus effectively ending the show).

So now that you've decided upon the types of shows you think would serve you well in writing your two sample spec scripts, you should narrow down specifically which two shows you would feel most comfortable writing. Those should be the shows whose themes and issues—but most importantly, characters—speak to you most clearly. The point of one-hour drama is well-crafted, dramatic situations that move readers with their realistic and powerful approach to the characters' lives. And even though the plot-driven procedurals like *CSI* and *Law And Order* often seem to treat character development incidentally, those shows' characters are nonetheless part of a bigger working fabric in which peoples' actions dictate the show's moral dilemmas. So before you decide what your plot should be, you need to understand a few things about the show's characters, what purpose or function they serve in the show, and what makes them tick.

Protagonists

The protagonist of any given show is the main character around whom the bulk of the action is centered. For example, even though *The Sopranos* is technically a show about family and the mafia, its protagonist is Tony Soprano (the character played by James Gandolfini) because, as the head of both families he is invariably the character through whose eyes the majority of the show unfolds; it would be impossible to fathom an episode in which Tony's presence didn't factor into the actions of the supporting characters. Some shows' protagonists are easily defined by merit of the title—*Judging Amy*—comes to mind, or by merit of the position of the star's name in the credits, as is the case with David Caruso in the otherwise ensemble-driven *CSI Miami*. The important thing to note is that while plenty of scenes will not

involve the protagonist, he or she remains a presence throughout the episode in question.

So why is this important to know? Mostly because a closer examination of a show's protagonist will provide an education to the viewer (not to mention the aspiring spec script writer) about what the show is truly about—heart and soul, speaking—as is evident from the analyses listed below:

1. **Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*):** About as far away from the *Father Knows Best*-model of television dad as possible, Tony Soprano provides *The Sopranos* with a new kind of moral barometer. Before *The Sopranos*, protagonists in successful shows were expected to make morally acceptable choices; they rarely, if ever, crossed an ethical line that made them an official “bad guy.” Any such transgressions a show presented were usually in the form of supporting or guest characters, the point of which were to create an ethical dilemma for the show's protagonist. Tony Soprano, on the other hand, is frequently the architect of the lapsed ethics at the root of the show; he is a heavy of the highest order, a killer with on-camera blood on his hands. But in order to make sense of his world—which, contrary to what might strike the viewer at first glance, is not simply an abyss of moral chaos—one must understand the universe Tony inhabits. He does not work in the regulated, white-collar world of law or medicine, nor is he even a blue collar tough guy cop; Tony is the head of a crime family whose survival is based upon his ability to call upon a cool-headed ruthlessness. Tony distinguishes himself from his underlings, most of whom kill or beat bloody innocent people at the slightest provocation, by his sense of judgment. If nobody is truly innocent in Tony's world, there are still some people who are less accountable than others; it is this nuanced morality that characterizes Tony Soprano's day-to-day conflicts and the show's skewed, yet unforgettably dramatic universe.
2. **Josiah “Jed” Bartlett (*The West Wing*):** The Aaron Sorkin-created show *The West Wing* has become one of the most highly regarded shows in television history due largely to the conflicts its protagonist, Jed Bartlett, must face. As President of the United States, Bartlett, an inherently decent man, finds himself fighting the good fight between adhering to his values and giving in to the inevitable compromises his office demands of him. Bartlett's ability to land somewhere in the vast gray area between these two polarities is what defines not only his character but that of the show as well. Whether agonizing over whether to override the Supreme Court's refusal to stay the execution of a convicted murderer, or struggling to keep his volatile staff on an even

keep for the benefit of the country, Bartlett's issues are at once global and personal, and the stakes are commensurately enormous or comparatively infinitesimal. Thus the show's heart and soul involves the internal decision-making process of the most important decision maker in the land; Bartlett's ethical compass may not always be perfect, but is always compelling.

3. **Allison Dubois (*Medium*):** Inspired by the true account of a real-life psychic, *Medium* tells the story of Allison Dubois, a law student and mother of three who has struggled since childhood to make sense of her chilling dreams involving dead people. Fearing for her sanity, she turns to her boss in the D.A.'s office, who finally starts to believe that she might not only be telling the truth, but also might be able to help them get the upper hand when it comes to solving crimes. The show itself takes on the look and feel of a procedural, but its heart and soul lie at the crux of Allison's character and her fight to live a life constantly shifting from corporeal to ethereal. Allison is simultaneously wholly relatable (law student, mother of three) and wholly unrelatable (the "I see dead people" of it all), and the show's success as something of a spiritual thriller is due largely to its ability to merge the mundane and the fantastic. And the crimes Allison helps solve lend insight, thanks to her unique gifts, not only into our behavior in this world but also into our responsibilities to those who no longer inhabit it.

Secondary Characters

A show's secondary characters round out the protagonist's world—spouses, lovers, children, siblings, neighbors, bosses, co-workers, and anyone else with whom the protagonist comes into contact. Secondary characters either pour gasoline on the fire of the protagonist's dilemmas, or help him try to navigate a way out of them. They provide a limitless font of story ideas to the aspiring spec script writer and, depending on the show, can frequently find themselves embroiled in the kinds of messy dilemmas many shows' creators simply wouldn't risk placing the protagonist in (although cable shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, and *Rescue Me*, as well as soaps, have no such qualms about exposing the warts-and-all proclivities of their protagonists). Thus, a daughter might get pregnant, a spouse can struggle with alcoholism, and a boss can be revealed as an embezzler—all of which, in the course of a sample episode, can make for some pretty heady drama. Before saddling a secondary character with a problem or a problematic series of circumstances, however, you will need to watch the show carefully—using

a notepad if necessary—for the kinds of characteristic behavior you can then turn into the basis for a spec script.

Ensembles

Some shows truly revolve around an ensemble cast that makes it virtually impossible to make distinctions between protagonists and secondary characters (*Desperate Housewives* and *Law And Order* are two good examples). While this permits for a bit more leeway in terms of pushing the envelope with regard to the characters' actions, what is lost is a direct window into the heart and soul of the show. Instead, the shows ensemble characters function, in a way, as one—the *Desperate Housewives* of Wisteria Lane may not each suffer from the same form of suburban malaise as the others, but that's almost beside the point. The cops and lawyers in *Law And Order* may go about their business on different sides of the half-hour break (and, in most cases, never so much as exchange a single word), but they are unified in their common pursuit—putting the bad guys behind bars and making whatever sense they can of a morally compromised world.

What you will want to avoid when writing for an ensemble-driven show is the sense that your episode is simply a compilation of extraneous bits of material that are in no way connected to what the show is truly about. Hints on avoiding this, as well as other character-driven yet structurally-related pitfalls, will be further explored in a later section on structure.

Guest Characters

As you have no doubt noticed in the course of your viewing habits, practically no television show requires its characters to supply all the fodder for its episodes; this is where outside or “guest” characters come in handy. Guest characters are traditionally brought in for a “one-shot”—a one-episode stint—but can sometimes impact the show well beyond their initial run; indeed, there have been times when a guest character was so successful that he or she was ultimately written in as a series regular. When it comes to creating such a character for the purposes of your spec script, first evaluate the universes of the show's existing characters, then figure out what type of guest character would be able to supply the most dramatic impact. A memorable episode of the critically beloved ABC show *thirtysomething* detailed the events of what happened when Michael Steadman (the show's levelheaded, married advertising executive) was visited by a woman with

whom he used to be friends in college. The catch was that this woman and Michael had been soulmates of sorts, but had never consummated their relationship. Now, years later, the still-beautiful woman arrives in town and Michael finds himself tempted not so much to rekindle (as has been the case with other, less-interesting “ex-flame” episodes) but rather to ignite their long-overdue relationship. Michael comes close to the flame, but ultimately shies strongly away; when the woman asks him why, he succinctly says “because now there are others.” In a show that explored the meaning of love and family at the onset of that part of life, it was pretty powerful stuff indeed.

Case Study: Your Character Can Always Be Killed Off in a Car Crash

How Steven Bochco emphasized the ensemble over the star and ended the drama’s dependence on star drawing power

Steven Bochco is a legendary producer responsible for some of television’s biggest, most beloved hit shows (*Hill Street Blues*, *L.A. Law*, *NYPD Blue*) as well as a mentor for some of television’s most prolific writer/producers—among them David E. Kelley, the creator of *Chicago Hope*, *The Practice*, and *Ally McBeal* and the only man to win the Emmy for best comedy series and best dramatic series in the same year. A visionary of sorts, Bochco was one of the first writers to approach the dramatic format—which, prior to *Hill Street Blues*, had become the realm of wooden, one-dimensional cop shows like *The Streets of San Francisco* and corny family melodramas like *The Waltons*—and infuse it with three-dimensional characters whom viewers grew to love... and mourn, ultimately, when those characters were no longer on the air.

Faced with exploding budgets in the eighties, Bochco took a good, hard look at what made his shows tick. And the answer, while simple, would pave the way for the contemporary model of television as well as define why the medium differs from film. Bochco reasoned that, in any show about cops or lawyers (or even hospitals, as Kelley would soon discover), the setting and overall feeling—rather than any one particular actor or pair of actors—are the show’s stars. Thus, he opted against caving in to the demands of any star holding out on her contracts—opting instead, as he has famously been quoted, to “kill them off in a car crash.” Most famously, Bochco got rid of David Caruso over “creative differences” after the actor’s star-making first season on *NYPD Blue*, and while the show went on to garner scores

of Emmys for its writers and actors, Caruso bounced around from bad movie to bad movie before finally righting himself with *CSI Miami*.

While star vehicles certainly exist in the world of television drama (and viewers have been regaled with reports of those stars' stratospheric salary demands), Bochco's model served as a reminder to cooler network producers and executives that television created stars, not the other way around. It was a lesson that Dick Wolf would not only take to heart, but improve upon with *Law And Order*, whose casts he changes regularly so as to discourage undue viewer attachment to any one particular character. In retrospect, Bochco's point wasn't that characters aren't important—quite the contrary, they are the reasons his shows live or die. Rather, a show faces enough competition amidst the cluttered network landscape; it shouldn't face a plethora of potentially destructive internal competition as well.

Story and Structure in Dramas

CHAPTER 6

As an advertising-driven medium, television has always been structured around commercial breaks, each of which denotes the ending of an “act” (four in total, with occasionally a one or two-minute “tag” coming right before the credits). So now that you have done some serious thinking about genre and character, you need to come up with an idea for an episode and learn how to structure it so that the story will play as dramatically and—in the event you are writing a procedural spec—suspensefully as possible.

Episode ideas

In most cases, the best place to start figuring out your spec idea is with the show’s characters (procedurals, which are almost always plot-driven, will similarly involve character motivations, but in nearly every case they will involve outside characters). The more time you have spent analyzing the show’s characters, the more you will understand where they are coming from and the better you will be at placing them in appropriate dramatic situations. Say, for example, you wanted to write an episode of the CBS show *Judging Amy* and, since this is your first-ever spec script, you decided that the best place to start would be with the show’s titular protagonist. You would sift through every aspect of Amy’s professional and personal life and gauge how much the two worlds collide in the course of any given episode.

Your next step would be to figure out something that could happen in Amy’s life that would create as much of a dilemma as the next 52 minutes could handle (the rest of the hour is devoted to commercials—even in the case of cable shows whose commercials come in blocks at the end of the show); a more detailed discussion of dilemmas and their importance to structure ensues in a later section in this chapter. If you are writing a procedural spec script, you would don your Sherlock Holmes cap, roll up your sleeves and concoct a contemporary, page-turning mystery. Since most procedurals involve lawyers and policemen whose job it is to determine why people commit crimes and how they should be punished, the possibilities for show ideas are endless.

A, B, and C stories

You're watching an episode of *Desperate Housewives* and you happen to notice that there's not one, not two, but what appears to be three different storylines going on. You're pretty clear on what's happening in the main storyline (known as the "A" story), but you can't quite figure out what two other characters' stories are doing there. What you need to know first about structure is that in most shows, even those that aren't fueled by thriller or soap plot devices, the hour is filled up with a couple of modifying stories (known as "B" and "C" stories, depending on which one is occupying more screen time). There has been the occasional episode of a show that verges into "D" and even "E" stories, but since there are only so many minutes of available screen time in any given episode, most storyline threads beyond the "C" story amount to little more than running gags or small, incidental bits of character business.

Depending on the show, the "B" and/or "C" stories may or may not have anything to do with the theme and character developments occurring in the "A" story, but rest assured, just because most episodes of *7th Heaven* may feature two characters struggling with entirely unrelated issues doesn't mean that you can't explore some underlying theme that might weave the stories together.

Dilemmas

As a viewer, you have probably watched episodes of television in which you found yourself so gripped by the events that were unfolding that you couldn't bear to change the channel. Though you probably didn't realize it at the time, that effect was carefully designed by the writers of that episode.

As in life, television drama is driven largely by conflict both internal and external; characters exist in conflict with both their surroundings and with themselves. And the quickest way to conflict is through creation of a dilemma, a situation in which a character finds himself between the proverbial rock and the all-too-common hard place. Dilemmas contain inherent suspense because the audience is naturally wondering how the character will steer herself out of the professional and/or emotional mess into which she has gotten herself. And the best type of dilemma of all is one in which the character must choose between making the easy choice and making the right choice.

Say, for example, Jed Bartlett from *The West Wing* was considering signing a bill that would pass sweeping new changes in health care reforms. The

dilemma would ensue when it became clear that such an act would take money away from a project that would put him in good favor with a powerful, moneyed lobby whose assistance would be indispensable in the upcoming election. The easy choice would be to serve his own needs and rationalize away the health-care concerns. However, the right choice would be to do what he was elected to do: serve the people. Further compounding his dilemma—as well as making the way out of it clearer—could be a personal connection to someone who is dying due to insufficient health coverage.

Reality in TV, not reality TV

If you are having a difficult time concocting an episode idea from scratch, consider some drama that occurred in your own life. Did you ever have to play King Solomon between two friends? Between parents? Have to fire an employee who you knew needed the job badly? Everyday life is filled with dilemma-driven, dramatically worthy situations that you can then project onto a show's characters, just as any show, despite its own particularities, contains the same universal fodder that comprises your day-to-day existence.

Reality in the case of *Law And Order*—a show whose early branding campaign promised stories that were “ripped from the headlines”—becomes just that: the more specifically the case can be dramatized, the better the dramatic yield. The *SVU* and *Criminal Intent* branches of the *Law And Order* series and the entire *CSI* franchise have targeted subject matter that is every bit as mentally explicit as it is physically so; cases tend to hinge on a specific concurrence of forensic details that dovetails into a psychological breakdown of the evil that men do. Even the most technically-savvy writers (many of whom themselves are former lawyers, cops, and forensic scientists) note that even though research yields them the topical aspects of their story, the ultimate punch is packed in the process of putting the pieces together from the inside out. Thus your goal in writing the procedural spec should be to absorb as much true crime as possible, but not lose sight of the human drama that created the evidence trail in the first place.

Don't step on the soap

Most hour-long dramas deal with anywhere from one to four individual storylines per episode, most of which are resolved—to a vast degree—by the end of the hour (procedurals, which tend to carry over little by way of subject matter from episode to episode, are a notable exception). However, you may have noticed that there are other storylines that are introduced at various

points throughout a show's season (a budding romance, a character's struggle with illness, the reconciliation of a strained familial relationship, etc.) that are intended to run the course of several episodes. And the episodes of the more soap opera-driven shows, or cliffhanger-heavy thriller shows like *Lost* and *Prison Break* are little more than individual chapters in a much longer story. So how can you write an episode of a show that manages to work through an interesting dilemma that is characteristic, yet not does bite off more from the show's overarching, multi-episodic storylines than it can chew?

The best advice is to flat-out ignore the bigger issues to whatever extent you can. Obviously if a character has cancer, you can work on an episode in which a new treatment is discussed, or prognosis is made; however, it would not be okay to write the character's deathbed scene. If a romance is in full bloom, you could very well write an episode in which the characters break up, just so long as they are back together by the end of the episode. You would be ill-advised to write an episode that ends with one of the lovebirds happily dating someone new, as that will probably not be the case in the actual show.

Four-Act Structure

As stated previously, every episode of television is broken into four acts; even episodes of shows that do not have to be physically divided into four acts by commercials still hit roughly the same points in their development where certain things have to happen. The basic parameters for what needs to happen in each act is as follows:

Act One

Your first act will need to establish the underlying basis for the "A" and "B" (and, if necessary, "C") stories. In the course of doing so, you must introduce any outside characters and hint at how they will be affecting the storyline(s). Make sure to have a mini-cliffhanger moment at the first act break (roughly p.13-15) that creates a modicum of tension or suspense. For example, if you are writing a *West Wing* spec episode in which Jed Bartlett is confronted with a decision whether or not to confirm a politically controversial, yet eminently capable Supreme Court Justice nominee, the first hint that such a drastic measure might be necessary would be indicated by the first act break. If you are writing a procedural, the first act break would usually signify the introduction of a piece of evidence that takes the plot in a whole new, unexpected direction.

Act Two

In Act Two, you will want to raise the bar and the stakes a bit. The characters' issues need to become more entangled as the events that create the dilemma begin to unfold. In the aforementioned Jed Bartlett episode, the nominee's views might actively start to cause Bartlett to slip in the polls, right at a time when the country needs Bartlett to act decisively every bit as much as it needs a new Justice. All, of course, while the "B" and "C" stories intensify either as a result of, or in addition to the possibilities placed before Bartlett. In a procedural, you would want to introduce a whopper of a twist (of course in *Law And Order*, this would be the point of the script when the primary suspect would be arrested). The end of the act, the half-hour break (roughly around p. 27-30) needs to create a much bigger, more resonant cliffhanger so that viewers will continue to stick with the show—as opposed to switching the channel to a sitcom or reality show that's about to begin on another channel.

Act Three

Your third act tends to explore the consequences of the protagonist's actions while at the same time intensifying to whatever extent possible and necessary the "B" and "C" story arcs. In the *West Wing* episode, Bartlett would be examining every possible ramification of the nominee's effect on the future of the country, with a not-inconsiderable thought detour that involves how this will all affect his own future as well. He would also have ample opportunity to reflect upon his own character and how the office has changed him either for the better or for the worse. He would hint, albeit opaquely, at which way he was leaning right as the third act was about to draw to a close (which, page-wise, would occur roughly around p. 42-45). Your procedural script would take one more twist by the end of the third act right as the mystery was close to unfolding its final layer, which occurs in act four.

Act Four

The final act of your script should wrap up all the stories and, if possible/necessary, bring them together thematically. You should make a point to try and end the conflict as unpredictably, or at least as dramatically interestingly as possible. *Law And Order* doesn't end with the good guys always winning, nor does *The West Wing* always end with Bartlett having made the kind of difference he would like to have in the lives of his staff and constituents; the episode idea mentioned above might find Bartlett prevailing in confirming the new Justice, but not without a healthy degree of

ambivalence—the final shot might find him sitting in repose in the Oval Office as the picture fades to black. And, of course no procedural would be complete without some moral to the story—if not an answer to the inevitable questions about the nature of evil, at least a clarification of some sort.

Breakdowns of Successful One-Hour Dramatic Episodes

1. *The Sopranos*—Episode Title: “College”/Original Air Date: 2/7/99

A classic example of a great dilemma with a surprising, yet entirely characteristic resolution occurs in one of the *Sopranos*’ first season episodes entitled “College.” Tony has decided to embark upon that most typical of rites of passage: the parent/child collegiate tour. They arrive on the ground of the campus, with its storied architecture and leafy walkways, but right at the end of the first act Tony runs into a mobster who had testified against many of his cronies and is now living under witness protection. Meanwhile, back at home Carmella decides to invite Father Phil—the local priest with whom she has bonded over shared culinary and cultural interests—over for dinner.

The first act ends with the “A” story presenting the plot device—in this case, the discovery of the location of the witness—that will yield the bulk of the episode’s drama, while the “B” story (Carmella’s increasingly complicated relationship with Father Phil) offers up a moral dilemma of a different sort. In acts two and three Tony’s dilemma becomes more pronounced, as it becomes clear that not only did this guy help send a lot of Tony’s friends away, he himself had been a friend—a trusted member of Tony’s second family. But the needs of Tony’s first family—in this case represented by Meadow’s joy at having earned the right to be considered by such a prestigious academic institution—weigh heavily on Tony. How can he exult in such a joyous occasion while knowing that a major piece of unfinished business—a man his cronies wouldn’t think twice about killing in the most gruesome fashion possible—is a mere hop, skip, and a jump away from where he is staying? And Carmella and Father Phil, following some wine and a film, are starting to feel their mutual attraction percolating into something real—and threatening, given not only Father Phil’s profession, but Carmella’s marriage.

The episode reaches its climax as Tony, sitting on a bench at his daughter’s would-be alma mater, reads an engraved quote behind him insisting that no man can live in this world without accountability—and

yet we, the audience, clearly read it differently than does Tony, whose conscience cannot suffer the thought of this violator enjoying his undeserved freedom. Tony's accountability must be to his family... and his family, in whose name he seeks vengeance. And so rather than forgive and move on, Tony strangles the man in an act of cold-blooded murder. And while all this is going on, the clearly willing Carmella realizes that Father Phil is backing down from her attraction to him and nothing ends up happening between the two. Thus Carmella winds up remaining faithful, although not necessarily by choice, and Tony winds up with more blood on his hands. The common theme that binds the two stories, as we realize in the end, is the notion of honor not always being the result of the obvious choice... or any choice at all, for that matter.

2. *Law and Order SVU*—Episode Title: 911/ Original Air Date: 10/4/05

The procedural *Law and Order SVU*, a spinoff of the granddaddy that started the procedural craze, delves into the dark, disturbing aspects of human behavior covered by the Special Victims Unit of the NYPD. The recent episode *911* begins with a phone call made by a young Spanish-accented girl named Maria who claims she's being held in a room by a man who insists he is her father. Her story isn't entirely clear (although she is specific about details like hearing steps coming down a staircase and her captor's glasses, which he puts into a blue case before "doing these things" to her), and Olivia Benson, the empathetic detective played by Mariska Hargitay, gets on the phone in an effort to get to the bottom of the girl's situation.

Immediately there is some measure of suspicion as to whether or not Maria is legitimate; she claims to have "found" a cellphone lying around, and the facts about how she is even in this country in the first place strike the detectives as somewhat inconsistent (her accent and alleged age make matters of communication all the more difficult). Benson is convinced that the girl is telling the truth but the detectives, who remain skeptical, start arguing about whether or not to expend the full extent of their manpower chasing this one down. Their worst suspicions seem confirmed when, acting on a tip from Maria about a hamburger establishment from which her captor feeds her, the detectives send men over to the address only to find that the place burned down three months ago... and that it's located right across the street from an electronics shop specializing in spook-type voice changers and signal buggers (the end of the first act).

The second act begins with Benson standing her ground as an expert in languages and voice inflections is brought in to listen to the little girl speak. The expert identifies the girl's accent as Honduran, which checks out with the girl's account of being from Tegucigalpa. Benson, remembering the girl's story about her mother sending her with a cousin to go to her father in America, surmises that the cousin may instead have sold the girl to a pedophile. The detectives begin a search for anything matching the girl's profile in Tegucigalpa, but the skepticism around the girl's legitimacy remains; a trace on the phone reveals that the call is coming from wildly varying points in the city, and Benson receives a call from another girl who reveals herself to be none other than Detective Munch using a spook-shop voice-changer. Munch reminds Benson of the time over a hundred detectives went in search of a four year-old girl who claimed she'd been tortured by her mother, only to reveal that they'd been set up by a disturbed seventeen-year-old with an electronics fetish.

Just as Benson is at her nadir, however, the report arrives from Tegucigalpa confirming that a nine-year-old girl named Maria was sent to America by her mother to stay with her father... but she never arrived. Benson's theory seems validated, especially once an electronics expert identifies the phone glitch as a virus used by electronics junkies to thwart tracing efforts. As they start debugging the virus, however, Maria's phone battery starts to go (the second act break). So in the first half of the show, the stakes behind the race to find the girl are ratcheted up by the strong possibility that the entire thing is a hoax; now, in the third act, the stakes take a dramatically different turn as Benson receives a picture of Maria from the Honduran police.

Convinced she's seen the girl's face before, she flips through a series of files that had been sent down by the Montreal SVU unit that had been conducting an investigation into an online child pornography ring. Sure enough, she finds a picture of Maria in a file belonging to one of the worst online offenders the SVU unit has uncovered to date. Maria's battery is almost out of juice, but the SVU unit finally gets rid of the virus that's blocking the trace. Benson excitedly tells Maria to hang up and call again so that the SVU unit can now trace exactly where the call is coming from... but just as she's saying this, we hear a man's heavy breathing from the other end of the line. "Who is this?" he asks. Benson, bluffing, informs him that this is the police and that they know exactly where he is. "No you don't," he mockingly replies, then hangs up (third act break).

With no time left to lose, the detectives take another look at the picture of Maria and notice a soda cup with the name of the burned-down hamburger shop. They retrace their steps; just as they get there, Benson notices a man standing off to the side, watching them. In slow motion, he takes off his glasses and puts them into a case... just like Maria had said her captor did. The man gets into his car and starts to speed off, but Benson draws her gun and the car screeches to a halt. Benson asks the man what he was doing in the neighborhood, and he replies that he was on his way home from a business meeting and that he owns a store there, nodding to a locked storefront next to the burned-out hamburger stand.

Benson and the detectives enter the storefront and find a staircase leading down to a basement. They descend and see the exact staged setting depicted in the pornographic pictures of Maria. Now the man who owns the storefront tells them he'd like to talk to his lawyer, but Benson—now noticing the underside of the man's shoes as he kicks back on the bed—asks him why, if he was on his way home from a business meeting, his shoes are caked with mud? Another one of the detectives remembers that the burned-out hamburger site was quite muddy. Benson and the detectives run over to the site and, looking around, find a makeshift grave, inside of which they find the hastily chloroformed and buried (but still alive) Maria.

The episode is a textbook example of how to begin with a baseline premise (in this case, a missing girl) and fill up four acts with developments and jeopardy; at first the audience doesn't know whether or not the whole thing is a hoax; once they find out it's not, they're not sure if the detectives will be resourceful enough to find the girl before it's too late.

Dialogue in Dramas

CHAPTER 7

Okay, so now that you've gotten some idea of what kinds of roles characters play and the purposes of those roles, how do you go about conveying all this? In other words—so to speak—what actually comes out of their mouths?

Dialogue is perhaps the most difficult thing to learn in the course of becoming a writer; structure can be taught, and characters—at least in principle—can be observed, but how to write the words that make a show's characters just so requires a great ear and a lot of training. So what are the kinds of craft-building tips that can be taught, given that, like the rest of us you're probably not the television-writing equivalent of Mozart? Below are some tips and pointers to keep in mind when it's time to let the characters speak for themselves.

Dialogue vs. Conversation

One of the most important lessons you will ever learn as a television writer—especially when it comes time to self-edit—is the difference between conversation and dialogue. Simply put, dialogue is conversation with a point, with subtext. Dialogue must either move the characters or the plot forward, and in the best, most economically written screenplays, you won't find so much as a wasted syllable. Take, for example, the following exchange between Carmella and Meadow Soprano:

CARMELLA

Hey there, Meadow.

MEADOW

Hey Mom.

CARMELLA

What's going on?

MEADOW

Oh, nothing. How about you?

CARMELLA

Nothing. Are you going over to Steven's later?

MEADOW

Yeah.

CARMELLA

I thought things were over between you two.

Even though this might be a perfectly viable conversation that two people could have in real life, you just filled up nearly half of a page without telling us anything about either Carmella or Meadow, or about what their objectives are vis-à-vis the plot. Now, take for example, the following patch of dialogue:

CARMELLA

Heard you went over to Steven's the other night.

MEADOW

So?

CARMELLA

So I thought things were over between you two.

In three simple, economically constructed lines, you have established several important pieces of information—not only that Meadow was at Steven's the other night, but that Carmella was sufficiently concerned to look into it. Meadow's response conveys defensiveness, which sparks the reader's curiosity. Which is then clarified a great deal by Carmella's subsequent response that informs us of a history (and not one, as is clear by her judgmental stance, about which she felt favorably) between Meadow and Steven that is being revisited.

Subtext

Subtext is the art of implication, of alluding to more than the characters are saying outright. For example, let's say that Meadow went on to say something like the following:

MEADOW

Steven told me he loved me.

(beat)

He told me a lot of things.

We could reasonably intuit that Meadow has been burned by a Steven; she doesn't outright say "I've been burned by a man named Steven," but this is the subtext of what she is saying in this line of dialogue.

Avoiding exposition

One of the most difficult challenges you will face in the course of writing a dramatic television spec script is how to get certain points of relevant information across without that information coming across as needlessly expository (conveying unimportant information, which is inevitably boring). Take, for example, the following example of dialogue which, for the purposes of this exercise, would be uttered by Christopher, Tony Soprano's nephew:

CHRISTOPHER

Better be back before five o'clock, at which point Narducci, the villain who's been after us for two years, will be back to blow our heads off.

It's not that the audience doesn't need to know all the information being given, it's that the manner in which it is delivered is so clumsily direct—or “on the nose,” in writing parlance—that it comes off as laughable. Now take the same information, only written like this:

CHRISTOPHER

Jay's gonna be back at five o'clock. Which means you'd better be back by four thirty, unless you want two years of ducking and dodging the man to go down the drain.

Again, it's not the content that's so different, it's the manner in which that content is delivered that makes all the difference.

The Button

A scene's “button”—the term used for ending, or “buttoning” up a scene—should be a punchy moment that either reflects a terrific line delivered by one of the characters or a moment of suspense that bridges effortlessly into the next scene. One thing you definitely don't want to do is write past the button. For example, a scene's natural button might run something like this:

TONY

That kind of talk is exactly what I'm talking about.

Whereas an example of writing past the button would sound something like this:

TONY

That kind of talk is exactly what I'm talking about.

CARMELLA

Okay. 'Bye.

TONY

Bye.

On the other hand, some narration followed by a camera shot might work perfectly fine. For example:

TONY

That kind of talk is exactly what I'm talking about.

As Carmella takes this in...

You would end the scene there, on the visual of Carmella's reaction. The point is to end your scenes as snappily as possible, giving the reader no chance to pause or put the script down.

Action vs. Dialogue

You were just advised to avoid needless exposition in dialogue. One of the primary missions of any kind of television or screenwriting is to "show, don't tell" the story as much as possible. This means that you should do everything you can to have a character act in some way that speaks volumes about his character rather than simply having him talk about it; just as in real life where actions speak louder than words, on screens both big and small action is character. For example, rather than a scene in which a character explains his fear of spiders, he could see one and jump. Instead of having a character wax on ad infinitum about the lack of love in her life, have her cast a sideways, wistful glance at a demonstrably affectionate couple.

Note that this is similar in some ways to the notion of subtext in that the idea is to convey, rather than explicitly state the point. You can even have your characters' actions undermine their own dialogue—to comedic effect (in the spider example above, a man can loudly boast that he isn't scared of anything, then jump into his wife's arms upon spotting a spider) or dramatic effect (a woman tells a man she doesn't love him anymore, but can't quite manage to physically break away from where they're standing).

"Hearing" The Voices

Unlike screenwriting, in which the characters are original creations of the script's author, the characters of any given television spec script are already created. Thus the writer in question is judged not on the basis of how good his characters are, but rather on how well that writer "hears" the characters' voices. Say, for example, a character is gruff and relatively unpolished; chances are you will want to use a lot of inflections and unstructured sentences in their speech.

The goal is to take whatever steps necessary to ensure that your dialogue reflects the characters' inflections; if they're dramatic and tend to stress certain words in sentences, you want to underline those words. If the character speaks in a rapid-fire fashion, you might reconsider standard punctuation (and, while we're on the subject of how grammar can influence the rhythms of dialogue, you might brush up on the purposes of colons and semi-colons and use them accordingly), and if he's something of a plain, reactive type, you would probably want to write his dialogue in more of a slow, halting fashion—lots of pauses and moments of introspection—to reflect just how carefully the character measures his thoughts prior to sharing them.

GETTING HIRED

Chapter 8: Agents and Representation

Chapter 9: Internships, Writing Programs and Networking

Chapter 10: The Season... and Beyond

Agents and Representation

CHAPTER 8

Budd Schulberg's 1941 satirical Hollywood novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* first introduced the world to Sammy Glick, an agent with a spectacular skill for self-advancement that often came at the expense of those around him. The soulless, shameless huckster became a symbol for a segment of the industry that has, more often than not, been maligned by everyone familiar with their tactics. And yet even though the stereotypical agent can be seamlessly inserted into the punchline of virtually any lawyer joke ("Why don't sharks eat agents? Professional courtesy"), the truth is that creative types like writers need agents. Which is not to say that the writer-agent alliance is a blissful one—indeed, to hear each side air its laundry list of complaints about the other is to truly understand the definition of the term "dysfunctional relationship"—but even the greenest writer is well-aware that he who represents himself represents a fool. If you are ever going to have any success as a writer, you will have to have an agent.

But what type of agent will be right for you, and what kind of agency will she be a part of? Although the stereotype of Sammy Glick may still be alive and well, the business of agenting has changed quite a bit. It is extremely difficult to interest an agent in your work, and yet even if you're lucky enough for this to be the case the agent in question may not ultimately be the best person to represent you and your work.

Agents

What is an agent?

A television agent functions as a form of headhunter for a writer. An agent's job is to get you work as a television writer—on either a writing staff or as a freelance "assignment" writer (more on this later) based on your scripts, which he is constantly circulating around town in order to win you fans among the executives and producers in charge of hiring writers. Agents work entirely on commission, taking ten percent of whatever fee they can negotiate for your work, thus the origin of the term "tenpercenteries" used in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* to describe the boutiques and major agencies. Keep in mind that it is unheard of for an agent to charge a penny

more than ten percent of your earnings; similarly, it is out of the question for an agent to demand an upfront fee—if these are the terms being presented by someone claiming to be an agent, he or she is to be avoided at all costs.

Because agents initially work for free, it is imperative that they feel passionately about the work they represent; some agents make lofty assurances about their choosiness when signing clients, but have developed a reputation in the business for doing the “spaghetti thing” (i.e., throwing as much up against the wall to see what will stick). But in television, adhering to this philosophy will often mean that an agent is literally throwing five of her clients at the same job. Which means that you might actually find yourself facing competition not only from other writers for the showrunner’s attention, but from other writers within your agent’s coterie of clients as well. Regardless, this type of dilemma falls squarely in the “cart before the horse” category; let’s first address the steps you must take in order to get an agent in the first place.

How do you get an agent?

Because agents are the gateway to the big brass ring (and for good reason), they tend to be besieged by phone calls and queries from people far and wide who have designs on making it in the film business. Given the sheer volume—not to mention questionable, at times, sanity—of this segment of the population, it is small wonder that agents sequester themselves behind their assistants. And given their very real time constraints, there are only so many calls and e-mails to which they can respond; the odds are that when an agent scans his call log, he simply deletes any unfamiliar names. Sending them your script unsolicited is a waste of time, even if you attach a bouquet of flowers, a box of chocolate, or front row tickets for that agent’s favorite basketball team (all of which aspiring writers have done) for the simple reason that agencies have been sued far too many times by unrepresented writers who claim their script was stolen. The way the agencies see it, the risk that they may be discarding the next “Chinatown” is far outweighed by some very real liability concerns.

So how do you get an agent? Below are a few tips that, while certainly no guarantee, can help elucidate a process whose odds, more often than not, can feel insurmountable:

1. **Connections:** Since the best way to get an agent’s attention is to be referred by someone they know, get to know someone they know. This means rolling up your sleeves and playing “Six Degrees of Fill-In-

Agent's-Name-Here." Any friend of a neighbor of a relative will do, just as long as you're not overtly mercenary about your reasons for contacting them. And even if you are, it never hurts to ask. An agent is far more likely to respond to a message whose subject line reads: "Calling at the suggestion of so-and-so" than they are to one in which a writer has taken the liberty of dubbing himself "the next big thing—don't miss out!"

2. **Once you have them on the phone:** Remember that they don't really want to hear much about you as a person; to paraphrase Sir Laurence Olivier, they can fake their sincere concern later on. The best approach is to introduce yourself, remind the agent about your connection to him, and then pitch what you've written as succinctly as possible. If you're an aspiring sitcom writer and your spec script revolves around a funny idea, then by all means, give the agent your most succinct, funny summation pitch and try to solicit a chuckle from her. If you've written two dramatic specs, chances are you should just tell the agent which shows you've written them for and then put them in the mail.
3. **If you have to write a letter pitching yourself:** This falls squarely into the Plan B (second, and less preferable) category—as the agent interviewed below can confirm, agents sign people mostly on the basis of referrals. Still, it is not unheard of to get representation off a blind query letter; try anything you can to forge a personal connection (e.g., "I understand you're a big Bruin basketball fan; do you think Coach Howland is making as much progress as he should have by this point?"); once you've established contact you can then go through the steps outlined above. The good news is that you can afford to describe your background and specs with a bit more detail than permitted by phone; most agents will gladly read a paragraph in lieu of listening to an unseasoned writer's verbosity, plus you get the added advantage of constructed sentences over impromptu conversation—always a plus for someone trained in the art of the written word.

The bad news is that most blind queries wind up in the garbage can, unread. And remember, do not send a script until the agent officially gives you the green light—some agencies will even send a disclosure form for you to fill out to avoid any confusion. Make sure that agent personally requests the script herself, as opposed to the assistant who "thinks his boss wants to read it"; assistants don't have that level of authority, even though, as the next section will discuss, they can be tremendously helpful to you.

- 4. How many agencies should you submit to?** As many as possible; you are under no obligation to wait for an official pass before exposing the script to other agents, and the pace at which most agents read—or don't read—can feel positively glacial. Though you never want an agent playing the numbers game and treating you like a mere statistic, it is not a bad idea to do it on your end given the long odds involved.
- 5. Once a few weeks have gone by:** Start following up. Get to know the names of agents' assistants and always be nice, regardless of how snottily they treat you. Remember that they talk to dozens of you a week; as far as they're concerned, you're no different from a pesky telemarketer who calls repeatedly during dinner. And should you get the feeling that you're dealing with an actual human being instead of a headset with a suit he can't really afford, try anything you can to make a connection; you would be surprised at how many assistants stayed on their boss to return a phone call, all because they liked the voice of the person on the other end. Should you and an assistant find yourselves simpatico based on your common likes and dislikes (hint: everyone in the television business—especially an employee as underpaid as an assistant—loves television), ask her how long she's been working there. In most cases, assistants are trainees who are on track for promotion to junior agent status, which means that, if possible, try to figure out how far away that date might be and then work the relationship. It is not at all uncommon for a successful writer/agent collaboration to begin in this fashion.
- 6. How often to call:** Every other week following the initial three-week grace period. You want to be consistent, yet not too persistent; checking in, as opposed to reminding. And, despite the butterflies swarming your stomach at the prospect of real industry feedback, be patient; you will earn bonus points for being well-aware of the staggering amount of material an agent must read in any given week, and an agent's existing clients will always come first. Don't try to goose the process with transparent bluff tactics ("I'm getting great feedback from CAA"), or with irrelevant information ("So-and-so's head of development is reading it as we speak"). On the other hand, if you do have positive response from a competing agency, make sure to convey this fact to the assistant or to the agent directly (provided he is taking your call), especially if you're close to an offer from another agency. It's considered bad protocol to give someone a window of opportunity to consider you, then take it away without at least giving them due notice.
- 7. Learn when to throw in the towel:** Contrary to the way it works in movies, persistence doesn't always pay off in the television business; if

a few months have gone by without any response, at which point you've left the would-be agent something like four or five messages, then it's time to move on.

- 7. If you are lucky enough to have your choice of agents:** After a hearty pat on the back and an acknowledgement that this dilemma falls squarely into the “embarrassment of riches” department, there is still a big decision to be made. After meeting with the interested parties, ask yourself the following questions: who sounded more passionate about my work? Who seemed to have a plan of action and a clear vision for my career? Who seemed to be more honest about my chances (believe it or not, there are still plenty of decent, honest agents out there; a good agent should be able to level with you not only about your possibilities in the marketplace, but also about the quality of your work)? And which agency felt like a better fit for you, not only professionally but personally speaking as well?

Majors and boutiques

Agencies in the entertainment industry tend to fall into two categories: majors and boutiques. The majors, also known as the Big Five, are the biggest outfits in town due to their mix of actors, directors, and writers and include the following: Creative Artist's Agency (CAA), International Creative Management (ICM), The William Morris Agency (WMA or William Morris), United Talent Agency (UTA), and Endeavor. Paradigm, a former boutique, is en route to becoming a major after merging with two other well-regarded boutiques.

Boutique agencies include places like the Gersh Agency and the Agency for Performing Arts (APA), who tend to represent writers and directors only and, despite APA's moniker, not performing talent (although the consolidation-driven atmosphere of the corporate world is very much alive in the agency business as well, and several boutiques are evaluating their viability without a strong actor clientele).

The general consensus is that boutiques provide the writer with a more personal touch, especially one who is just getting going, because they aren't as busy catering to their big-ticket items (the movie stars and A-list directors). While there is some truth to this, it is also important to remember that your agent will be your point person in all your business dealings. Thus it is really the agent who will determine just how much attention you will receive. There are writers at majors who haven't yet earned their agency a great deal of

money, but speak with their agent twice or three times a week (in most cases, this will be an agent who has just started out and is a bit hungrier) while other writers at boutiques can barely get their agent on the phone. The old industry adage, “it’s not the agency, it’s the agent” is very much true, so it’s vital to really know who you’re doing business with.

But what are the basic advantages of being with a major versus those of being at a boutique? There is certainly the attention factor; agents at majors are competing with other agents within their agency to get writers on the staffs of television shows (the situation outlined earlier), which essentially means that you are competing with many of the agency’s other writers for jobs. It stands to reason that since boutiques have fewer clients, there is not as much competition within their walls. At the same time, with the exception of a few mid-sized boutiques that wield significant power in television due to the cachet of their client list (such as the Broder/Webb/Chervin/Silbermann agency), many boutiques simply don’t have the clout or the connections to get your scripts read at the highest level.

So how should you make your decision? For starters, if you are lucky enough to know any television executives or producers, it would be a good idea to ask them which agents fight the hardest to get jobs for their clients; most executives and producers have a good idea of who they’re always in contact with during staffing season. You should also ask these other questions: is the agent in question a tough negotiator, or does he sometimes cross the line and end up negotiating his clients out of jobs? Is she well-regarded around town or has she burned too many people? How strong are his relationships with the young executives and up-and-coming producers, and how will he use these people as a springboard to meetings higher up on the food chain? If you don’t know an industry insider who can give you the basic scoop, try to get as many of these answers as possible when you actually do meet with the agent for the first time. Remember that this could be one of the most important decisions you ever make in your career, and your excitement at being in the room, surrounded by people in expensive suits, should in no way mitigate your need to know as much as possible about the person with whom you are about to do business.

Smaller agents

In the film *Jerry Maguire*, Tom Cruise’s eponymous character goes through a crisis of conscience and decides to head out on his own to service clients in a decent and ethical way. Okay, nice movie; now are there any real-life equivalents? The good news is, yes; plenty of agents find that the politics of

any big agency—and some boutiques big enough so that politics become a factor—are simply not what they had in mind when they decided to enter the field. Putting out one's own shingle is equally tough, as it involves overhead (rented office space, paid assistant) coming right out of one's own pocket, so the pressure for small agents to land jobs for clients and earn commission is fierce. This can be extremely good news for the overlooked-but-talented writer who simply needs more hand-holding and direction than any major or decent-sized boutique is willing to offer. At a small agency, you will face virtually no interior competition and enjoy far more access to an agent with her own outfit (or one that features a partnership between two or three agents). But the small agent had better be working his network, studio, and producer relationships tirelessly, because none of the major players in town in charge of hiring writers will actively be soliciting smaller agents for their clients' services.

Timing

Unlike the feature (movie) business, television runs on a cyclical, seasonal year; much in the same way the bulk of a CPA's work takes place around April 15th, the television industry experiences its busiest time around staffing season, which typically runs from mid-May through late June. Which means that there are good and bad times to solicit agents—but that said, when would those times be?

Most television agents, if they're looking to sign new clients (which plenty of them won't be), like to start reading scripts starting in September and October. This is because it typically takes that long to read scripts and then get official agency approval to bring you in as a client. As is the case with every writer at the beginning of his or her career, you will be dealing with a relatively junior agent, which means that he'll need someone above him to okay your signing. And if you want agents reading in September and October, your best bet is to start soliciting them sometime in July or August (plenty of agents, having recently staffed their clients, will be on vacation during these months, but just as many—if not more—will be around, looking to bring on new clients). Once you've got them in the reading zone, make sure to check in from time to time with a gentle nudge (as outlined in the section above). Your goal is to be signed by an agent sometime in November or December so that the agent will have the next few months to start getting your material out there.

Signing

Once you have officially been accepted into the agency and have been taken out once or twice for drinks or dinner to celebrate, you'll be given a stack of papers to sign—not to worry, nearly all agencies use a boilerplate agreement that stipulates that they represent your work and are entitled to ten percent of anything they sell and negotiate. Before you panic and start calling a lawyer to go through the thing with a fine-tooth comb, remember this: any agency contract can be nullified if the agent has not gotten you work in ninety days. Also know that no agency wants to keep an unhappy client, because it creates more problems for them. If you aren't clicking with your agent and think you have options elsewhere, move on; no one takes it personally, and the game of agency musical chairs that clients play occurs with such regularity that it can appear almost comical at times. Plus these contracts, regardless of the agency in question, are strictly boilerplate, and are in no way written to swindle you out of your hard-earned money.

Other Forms of Representation

Managers

Though many people assume personal managers to be the realm of the perennially spoiled, perpetually hand-held, mega-movie star, in fact managers for writers have become increasingly popular as of late. Just like an agent, a manager takes ten percent of your income and works entirely on commission (again, as with an agent, any manager who asks for money upfront is to be avoided at all cost); unlike an agent, however, a manager can produce your programming (which won't be happening until you create your own shows). Managers, who are often times ex-agents themselves, pride themselves on "seeing the big picture" and trying to think in out-of-the-box ways in order to get their clients jobs. Staffing stories abound in which an agent didn't manage to get anywhere with a client, only to have that client's manager—using the same material—uncover a job that the agent had either overlooked or didn't have the right angle into.

More often than not, a manager is brought in to revive a career that's stuck in quicksand. Still, the mere fact that you and your agent are in a rut isn't sufficient cause to hire a manager; after all, this person will take 10 percent of your income regardless of whether he's the one responsible for getting you a job in the end. In hiring a manager, you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. How long have I been with this particular agent?
2. How many job meetings (as opposed to general meetings—more on this later) has the agent gotten me?
3. Do I get the feeling that lately my agent is not really sending my material out?
4. Does my agent get right on the phone whenever I call his office?
5. When he doesn't get right on the phone, am I finding myself waiting an increasingly long period of time for my calls to be returned?

If the answer to question one is less than nine months (roughly one staffing cycle), chances are you're acting a bit prematurely. But if after your first staffing cycle, your agent has gotten you one or no job meetings, you should consider hiring a manager to better your chances, or at least reconsider your choice of agent. And if the answers to questions three and four are "no"—which usually means that the answer to question five is "yes"—then you should definitely be looking to hire a manager.

Even though managers come in roughly the same shapes and sizes as agents—the biggies, the boutiques, and the small shop—the larger outfits and more prestigious boutiques won't take on anyone without a track record. So as a newcomer, any attempt to solicit the services of a top-drawer management company like The Firm or Brillstein-Grey would be a waste of time; you would be better served trying to interest a small, relatively new manager with impeccable connections but a smaller, more serviceable client base.

But how do you even find out who those managers are in the first place? Your best bet—and a good idea in general—would be to pick up a copy of the *Hollywood Creative Directory*, which is a kind of Yellow Pages for the entertainment industry (and can easily be ordered on Amazon). Given the flux involved in most entertainment careers (it can seem as though executives change not only jobs, but job definitions as often as they do underwear), make sure you get the most recent edition. Then peruse the section entitled "MANAGERS" and get a general sense of how big a certain outfit is and what types of clients they're looking for. Some managers specialize only in film and will be loath to take on any television clients. Some will have television clients, but only at the highest (show creator/showrunner) levels, and will not be interested in breaking out the career of a newcomer. If you find yourself still at a loss after a good read of the Directory, a standard Internet search (with key words such as "television manager" or "television

management company”) is a good way to narrow down the field and potentially even find someone whose name did not make the Directory.

Lawyers

Television lawyers are not as recent a development as television managers, but the jury is still out as to their necessity, especially for a new television writer whose deals will be fairly boilerplate-standard. Most writers employ a lawyer for deals that involve matters of ownership and syndication rights, issues that will not pertain to you as a new television writer working on an established show.

Since these lawyers work on commission (5%) rather than on the basis of an hourly fee, you will not be required to spend any money upfront; keep in mind, however, that once you are staffed on a show, the lawyer who helped out on the deal will continue to collect that commission, even if she is no longer representing you (for example, if you and your lawyer part ways after season one of the show, but you continue to stay on that show as a writer for four more seasons, the lawyer will commission you for each of those seasons as well).

Internships, Writing Programs and Networking

CHAPTER 9

The television industry has a plethora of “backdoor” entries. Aside from actual industry-related paid positions—still the ideal way to make contacts and learn the nature of the business from the inside out—the following internships and programs provide a way to get your foot in the door.

Internships

It’s pretty much a given that everyone loves free labor. For a college student on summer vacation, or for the recent college graduate fortunate enough to have some financial assistance from his family, there’s no better way to insinuate yourself into the industry.

- 1. Network and studio internships:** Usually listed on the network or studio’s website, which can be accessed by a quick Internet search or by checking the *Hollywood Creative Directory*. These jobs entail everything from go-fer duties (script copying and coffee-delivering) to pages who help seat people for network show taping to mailroom positions, but they’re first-rate experience and have begun many a venerable career.
- 2. Agencies, management companies, and production companies:** Usually you’ll have to know someone to get one of these, if one is even available; with the exception of the production companies who will rarely turn down someone who wants to do their grunt work, most of these jobs go to paid trainees. But you’ll get to see the industry from the supply side, and the experience you gain while listening to these pros making their sales pitches will be invaluable.
- 3. The Writer’s Guild:** The Writer’s Guild sometimes advertises internships on their website (www.wga.org), and has both a West Coast as well as an East Coast branch.

Writer’s Programs and Adult Education

Writer’s programs run the gamut from studio-sponsored diversity programs that actually pay the writers whom they accept, to classes—both classroom-

based and online—that can provide valuable contacts and writing assistance (as well as partnerships).

- 1. Studio programs:** Television studios such as Warner Brothers and Walt Disney have diversity-related programs in place, and some are specifically tailored for women. Should you excel in the program, your name will be put on a “most favored” status list come staffing season, and the likelihood of your ending up with a staff job, while never great, is certainly as good as can be hoped for.
- 2. Continuing, or adult education:** Most of these classes, which are offered all over the internet and through universities’ night education programs, fall into the “how to write” category, but there is the possibility of meeting industry-connected professors or, if you live in Los Angeles and take a class through UCLA or USC Extension, actual industry executives who sometimes take these classes with the hopes of becoming writers themselves.
- 3. Fellowships and awards:** These are not given out with nearly the same frequency as those given out to aspiring screenwriters. However, studio-sponsored programs like Disney’s New Talent Program (http://www.abtalentdevelopment.com/html/writing_fellowship_mainpage.htm) and the Nickelodeon Writing Fellowship Program (www.nickwriting.com) can provide a valuable entrée into the business, but chiefly are on the lookout for cultural and ethnic diversity among their candidates. The Humanitas Awards, which mostly honor writers with industry experience, holds an annual contest in which a cash prize of \$10,000 is awarded to a promising new writer (log on to www.humanitasprize.org and look for the Angell comedy fellowship, named for the creator of *Frasier* who was killed in the 9/11 attacks).

Networking and Schmoozing, a.k.a. The Kitchen Sink

Even though the adage that “it’s all about who you know” (and what they’re willing to do for you) is an overly simplistic assessment of the entertainment industry, there is no doubt that having good professional relationships can only help when it comes time to send your material around. But how can you go about making those all-important contacts? If you live in Los Angeles or New York (but primarily if you live in Los Angeles), chances are you will have some decent opportunities to rub shoulders with people who can

ultimately be of assistance to you; avoid “hot” industry hangouts and clubs and instead focus on more intimate gatherings, such as the functions sponsored by the Writer’s Guild (you don’t necessarily have to be a member to attend) or college alumni industry-related events (virtually every Ivy League school has an alumni organization in this area, as do schools heavy in the communications fields like Northwestern, Syracuse, and Emerson).

If you can’t join these organizations yourself for whatever reason, try to hook up with friends and acquaintances who can, and then go with them. Keep your ear to the ground about industry-related parties and do whatever you can to wrangle an invite to the multitude of these affairs thrown by entertainment assistants; remember, within the next few years many of these people will be executives who can be of great assistance to your writing career. Keep in mind, however, that your agenda should never be connection first, personality second; if you don’t naturally jibe with someone, it will be every bit as obvious to them as it is to you. Try to remember that this is, when all is said and done, show business, which inevitably contains a multitude of engaging and animated personalities who fled more stable careers. So it shouldn’t be too much of an effort to make friends, and you should generally be simpatico with the people with whom you wish to establish relationships; it will give them greater incentive to help you out in the future if they genuinely like you. Find common interests—sports, for example. You’d be surprised at the number of writers who got critical meetings from informal games of softball, basketball, beach volleyball, or hockey. Join a rotisserie league. Play poker—a current rage in Hollywood—with whomever you can, knowing that one game can lead to another, and before you know it you could be sitting at a table next to Ben Affleck (who probably won’t be of much assistance to you, but at least you’ll get to tell everyone back home).

If you do not live in Los Angeles or New York and haven’t found your online classes to be a bonanza of contacts, try to enter as many of the above-listed competitions as you can, especially the pitch festivals (even if it requires saving money that would be wiser spent for groceries or rent). Employ every trick in the book you can think of to get people on the phone. Remember that at the end of the day, if your work is undeniably good, someone will eventually take notice.

The Season... and Beyond

CHAPTER 10

As you've found out by now, television tends to follow a seasonal schedule—the process of staffing new writers and developing new shows begins in September and ends in June. Since developing a new show is not an option available to most neophyte television writers, for now all you need to know is that development is a three-tiered process that begins with a script order from a network based on a successfully-pitched show idea, followed by a filmed pilot, then ultimately a show pickup or order (traditionally for eight or thirteen episodes, depending on whether the show will be on the fall schedule or will be a mid-season replacement of another cancelled show). And, of course, the likelihood of success becomes infinitely smaller at every stage—something like one in one hundred scripts actually winds up making it all the way to the finish line, although one might not guess it based on the product that ultimately appears onscreen.

Since the primary purpose of this book is to inform you how to get staffed on a show, this next chapter will address the month-by-month breakdown of what you should be doing in order to get staffed, as well as some Plan B options in the event that you don't.

The Road to Staffing

September

- As per the guidelines above, research the agencies. Figure out where your needs will best be met, and who the best point person (contact) will be within the agency, and do everything in your power to get her on the phone.
- Use every imaginable personal contact you have in order to establish contact with the agent. If you have no personal contacts, do your best “six degrees of separation” or find some common interest that can potentially help put you on his radar.

October

- Continue to make phone calls, even once you've gotten an agent to agree to read your material. Most agents will take at least one month (probably

closer to two), given the staggering pile of scripts they've got on their desks, so be patient. Be persistent, but not annoying.

- In the meantime, start logging on to industry-related web sites like www.futoncritic.com or www.tvtome.com for news on what scripts and projects are gaining heat for the upcoming development season.

November

- Provided you receive interest from an agent, schedule a meeting. If you've received interest from two agents, schedule two meetings, or as many as correlate to interested agents. Be upfront about whom you are meeting with; it will only impress the others further.
- In the days—or weeks—prior to the meeting, try to develop at least a basic familiarity with the projects in development you've read about; keep in mind that while most agents don't want to be told how to do their jobs, they will welcome input from you as to which show sensibilities you would feel most comfortable writing for.
- Additionally, do your best to familiarize yourself with the principals involved in those projects. Since most industry-related web sites will only list the names of the showrunner/creator and the third-party producer (or producers), you should make a mental note to ask your agent for the names of the studio and network executives overseeing projects in development.

December

- Meet with your agent. Get to know her as best you can and don't leave until she has answered all of your questions.
- Ask your agent if there are any upcoming staffing possibilities prior to staffing season; sometimes existing shows that are a lock for renewal will staff in February or March.
- Set up a follow-up lunch or drinks meeting (they'll pay, of course) to continue brainstorming for the months ahead.

January

- Request copies of every script that got commissioned for a pilot pickup (your agent will have them in abundance and will be only too happy to send

copies over to you) to which you feel your samples and overall sensibility would be applicable.

- While reading the scripts—and you should make it your business to read each and every one—try to get a basic understanding of what the networks are looking for (i.e., is there a preponderance of procedurals? Of supernatural “talk to the dead” shows?) You should be trying to get your commercial antenna as fine-tuned as possible throughout the reading process in preparation for the meetings that are about to ensue.
- Maintain close contact with your agent (at least once a week, but probably closer to twice) and urge him to schedule you as many meetings as possible so that the studio, network, and third-party producers will begin to register you on their radar.

February and March

- Take as many meetings as humanly possible. Don’t ever complain to your agent that a meeting is inconvenient; remember, you’re lucky to have even gotten this far and your attitude should reflect this.
- Try to determine in the course of your meetings which executives share your sensibilities—in television, for sure, but if you see an interesting pile of books on their bookshelf, by all means work it into the conversation.
- Do whatever you can to convey that you’re not just another disposable, wannabe face but rather that you’re in this for the long haul. Bear in mind that most of the executives with whom you’ll be meeting are junior in stature and will be rising through the ranks simultaneously alongside your (hopefully) commensurate ascension to showrunner status.

April

- Continue to keep your ear to the ground as far as which pilots are looking likely to make it onto the network’s fall or midseason schedule (between your agent and the web sites, you would be surprised at how reliable this information can be).
- Try to utilize every connection you and your agent have to get read by the showrunner of the likely candidates. Keep in mind that come May, showrunners will be besieged by offerings (if they aren’t already) and that the earlier you get your script in there, the better your chances of being read and considered.

May

- Studio and network heads fly to New York for the unveiling of the fall schedule. Meanwhile, back in L.A., the scrambling begins to fill the staffs of those fortunate chosen shows with writers.
- Take meetings with showrunners who liked your samples. Make it clear that you are a team player (further advice on how to meet with showrunners is in the next section). Impress her with your work ethic and eagerness to contribute to her vision for the show.

June

- Begin your high-paying job as a professional staff writer!

Questions and Other Considerations

- 1. I got two job offers. Which one should I accept?** The conventional wisdom says “follow the money,” which in this case means go with the show that you think has a greater likelihood of remaining on the air (traditionally, the longer a show is on the air, the better your chances of moving through the ranks and establishing yourself on the studio and network radar). However, if you are truly passionate about the other, less-likely-to-succeed show, you should follow your heart. Regardless, you should consult with your agent, whose opinion on the subject just might surprise you.
- 2. I got no job offers, but made some good contacts. What should I do?** Keep in touch, especially if the people with whom you met were showrunners; chances are that your agent might be able to get you in to pitch a freelance episode (every show is required by the Writer’s Guild to “farm out” two episodes to writers not on their staff as a means of keeping new blood in the mix). If the showrunner was especially impressed with your comic chops, he might keep you in mind when it comes time to “punch up” (a process in which writers gather to pitch jokes and generally try to improve) the next script he sells to the network.
- 3. I got no offers and made no contacts. What should I do?** Gauge your agent’s enthusiasm for you; if he isn’t returning your calls promptly—or at all—chances are you’re last week’s news. Write new scripts and go out and get a new agent.

Jobs Under the Radar: If You Don't Get Staffed

It's June and you didn't get staffed. Your agent seems equivocal at best about your prospects and promises to keep trying to find you something, but you sense that—as is the case with every frontier—you're pretty much on your own. How can you still try to find work as a television writer without much help from your representation? Well, the good news is that you're down, but definitely not out; there is plenty of work out there that doesn't fall squarely into the network variety, but still pays fairly well and is, for the most part, enjoyable. The bad news is these jobs aren't easy to find and you will have to plumb the depths of your resources in order to even be considered for them.

Lower-end cable shows

Some cable outlets, like TNT, FX, Showtime, USA, and of course HBO, function on the same radar as networks—in many cases, they pay the same rates as their network counterparts. However, there are some cable shows that, while viable, won't pay as much and will not likely translate into much prestige for a future job. Shows on channels like ABC Family, Disney Channel, and Lifetime are the writing equivalent of a temp gig: something you take for the money (should you be lucky enough to get it, of course), but don't necessarily include on your resume. Though it's hardly as though you were forced to work in pornography, network and high-end cable television can be a fairly snobby business and you will be better served with a resume that indicates you're a newcomer rather than as a three-episode veteran of *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*. As with any under-the-radar situations, your agent will, in most cases, not avail himself to you for the purposes of finding one of these gigs (although he'll gladly collect the commission once the checks start to arrive). Consider hiring a manager; the right one (in this case, one with a client roster largely consisting of B-level gigs like these) will work harder towards this end. Familiarize yourself with the roster of shows on these programming outlets, then try to get as many meetings as you can with their executives (there's far less red tape involved than in the network and high-end cable game) and win as many fans as you can.

Reality TV

The cat is pretty much out of the bag on this one; contrary to the genre heading that these shows claim to be under, most reality television involves a

good deal of scripting. Everything from *Elimidate* (which feasts on out-of-work comedy writers who fashion on-the-spot zingers for the show's hapless singles) to *Survivor* hire writers to work on everything from dialogue to storylines. Beware; these shows are unregulated by the Writer's Guild and complaints about the treatment of writers are pretty frequent. But they do pay, and you never know if someone you befriend in the trenches may prove to be helpful to you someday in the future.

Animation

Animation is another loop that remains under the radar of the Writer's Guild and of most agencies (there are, however, agencies that do specialize in this field). The genre has boomed in recent years, with stations like Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Disney Channel running as many as ten original shows each; this in addition to a longstanding tradition of Saturday morning cartoons on the conventional networks. Animation writers complain that that world is a ghetto, that it is virtually impossible to leap from animation to live action, but good samples are good samples and there is always the hope of writing your way out of it with a new original piece of material. If this is a field that appeals to you, you would be well-served to go back to part one of this guide and write an episode of *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*, which tend to resonate best with animation showrunners. You also have the option of submitting an original piece of material, as did the writer in the below case study, to great effect.

Case Study: Experiences in the World of Animation

In 2001, I was an unemployed sitcom writer. The market for jobs was becoming increasingly slim with each passing year, with fewer and fewer individuals landing coveted staff-writing jobs on shows. I was a little burned out from writing specs for existing shows; my increasing frustration with existing shows—compounded by my intuition that studio executives might privately be feeling the same way—led me to stray from my agent's advice and write a piece of original material.

I had always been interested in animation (I had been a huge fan of *The Simpsons*, especially during the show's early years), and I decided to write an animated comedy set in ancient Greece. The vast majority of my professional success to date had been based on a *Simpsons*

spec I'd written, and so I figured that animated comedy was my strong suit.

I centered the show around a young version of the ancient philosopher Socrates. My goal was to imbue young Socrates with the casual irreverence of Bart Simpson and the observational intelligence of Calvin from the comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*. Constellated around Socrates were a variety of characters, including animated versions of ancient Greek gods like Zeus. Upon finishing the script, my agents flipped over it—one of them even called me over the weekend to say it was one of the most original pilots he'd ever read. I was thrilled, and hoped this script might jumpstart my languishing career.

The script circled around Hollywood and was almost unanimously well-received, but the enthusiasm failed to land me a job on a TV sitcom. Frustrated, I begged my agent to secure me work. Since my agent was young and struggling himself, he didn't hang up on me in mid-cajole—he was actually rather sympathetic (or a damn good actor) and promised to look into employment at one of L.A.'s animation studios.

A week or so later, I received a call from my agent telling me he'd arranged a meeting at a company called Klasky/Csupo, a goliath firm in Los Angeles specializing in children's animation for Nickelodeon. My meeting went quite well; after the usual small-talk, the development executives pitched me an idea: would I like to pair up with one of their in-house animators to develop a show for Nickelodeon? Containing my Vesuvius-like excitement and projecting what I hoped was an air of utterly detached sangfroid, I told them that sounded great.

Shortly thereafter, I met with an animator who needed a writer to base a show on several drawings he'd recently completed. The drawings were set in a New England town and revolved around a young protagonist. I did my best to make sense of the somewhat nebulous drawings, but I had difficulty finding a through-line to connect the characters and locations. Fortunately, the animator—along with the executives I'd previously met—was enthusiastic about my writing and hired me to do another round of script-writing.

One freelance gig led to another, and before long Klasky/Csupo was my main means of employment. After penning a half-dozen or so "treatments"—written proposals for TV shows—for the animators at the company, Klasky/Csupo approached my agent with a development deal for me. Essentially the studio wanted me to work for them exclusively for the

better part of a year. Since the rest of Hollywood treated me somewhere between a non-entity and persona non-grata, my agent and I made the wise, informed, and no more than three-second decision to say yes.

Two weeks later, I was in an office at Klasky/Csupo. My hours were approximately ten-to-six—dream hours, especially compared to what my friends were pulling at network sitcom jobs. Most of my days were spent “punching up” (making funnier) existing treatments that executives at the company had commissioned by other writers. Occasionally—and this was my favorite aspect of the work—I would sit in the writing room of one of the studio’s animated comedies. During this time, the studio was producing many of Nickelodeon’s most popular series, including *Rugrats*, *The Wild Thornberries*, *As Told By Ginger*, and *Rocket Power*.

Though my development deal failed to produce any shows with my name under the title “Created By,” it did give me a good idea of the demands placed on animation writers, an oft-overlooked breed in writerly circles. Animation is an extremely viable outlet for aspiring TV writers, and I recommend they pursue it as vigorously as any other aspect in Hollywood.

Q&A about Animation

1. Do these jobs observe the same writer-producer hierarchies as the network/high-end cable shows?

In most cases, the answer is no; since the production budgets are much lower in this world, the entire staff may very well consist of a showrunner, another high-level producer, and a staff writer or two.

2. What kinds of salaries do these shows typically offer, and are there any back-end payments?

Whenever a show is not a signatory of the Writer’s Guild (meaning it has a responsibility to adhere to the pay scale set forth by the Guild), there is no typical pay scale. There tend not to be any back-end payments (known as residuals) either, which is another considerable perk of Writer’s Guild signatory shows.

3. What potential pitfalls, if any, exist in working for one of these shows?

As mentioned, animation can brand you a cartoon writer; other shows, should too many of them appear on your resume, will also paint you in an unfavorable light. Showrunners for major shows would almost always rather find the next great unproven talent than hire someone whose credits bring to mind a bloom that is well off the rose.

ON THE JOB

Chapter 11: The Powers That Be

The Powers That Be

CHAPTER 11

The television business involves a much more complicated system of buyers and sellers at its core than does the film business. Unlike the film business, the studios involved in television production function as both buyers and sellers for the projects to which they are attached. There are numerous executives involved at both junctures whom you will be sent out to meet. Plus, with film producers increasingly getting into the business of television production, there are more people than ever in the increasingly corporate television business. Though your involvement—at least in the initial stages—with these entities will be limited at best, you should still be as well-informed as possible when it comes to the business end of the business; your agent will be sending your scripts out to executives all over town, and you should be acquainted with not only who they are, but what service they perform in the long chain that leads to a staff writer position on a show.

How it All Works

Networks

The networks—and, in recent years, cable outlets—are the primary buyers in the television landscape. It is up to them to decide which programs will air on their station and when, and even though the landscape has exploded with channels that are loaded with programming, the Big Three remain CBS, ABC, and NBC (with Fox occasionally making the case for inclusion as part of a Big Four). Although the networks are technically the buyers, in most cases they don't own the show's negative—the actual show itself, whose content can be sold overseas and to syndication for frequently large sums of money (more on this below).

Although every network has vast branches and divisions responsible for everything from programming to ad revenue to decency standards, the people you will be sent out to meet are on the programming end. These will usually be directors of development and vice presidents—low to mid-level executives whose job it is to hear pitches and meet with new writers. Although these meetings will frequently be of the “meet and greet” variety, it is important to cultivate fans at the network; even though you're hardly ready to be pitching shows of your own, your goal should be to be able to do this a few years down the line. Even though programming executives cannot hire you directly, a big

fan at the network can help make a strong case for you when it comes time for the showrunners to select their writing staffs. Make sure to discuss which shows you love and why, which will hopefully be compatible with the shows the executives love; even if you are not a huge fan of a show over which an executive is gushing, do think of something interesting—and complimentary—to say about the show. The point is not so much to come off as a sycophant, but rather as an impassioned, creative person who will function well within the highly regimented structure of a writing staff.

Studios

Okay, you might be asking, if the networks technically don't own the show, then why are they allowed to broadcast it and charge advertising revenue? The answer is, because they pay a licensing fee—a form of rental—to the studio, which is the true owner of the material (along, in most cases, with the producers, who are minority owners—more on this later). The studio—in most cases, the same studios involved in film production, only using a specialty arm reserved for television—then applies this money toward the cost of the production, but it is by no means enough to cover the show's entire cost. Which means that the studio becomes involved in the “deficit financing” of the show: putting money toward the deficit between the licensing fee and the actual cost of producing the show. More often than not, this number can run into the tens of millions of dollars just for one season of a show, with the threat of cancellation not only a distinct possibility, but probability.

So how does this business make any sense for the studios at all? Because the real money in television is in sales of already-run episodes, to syndication and overseas. The magic number for a show in syndication is one hundred episodes (although sales for a show overseas and to various basic cable outlets sometimes can be done with fewer episodes in the can), and the profit margins can be staggering: *Seinfeld*, one of the most successful sitcoms of all time, has generated over one billion dollars in syndication revenue (and the number is still growing).

To bring this all back to you, your agent should be sending you on a run of studio meetings, as well as network meetings. You will be meeting with the same directors of developments and vice presidents, whose jobs are more or less the same as their network counterparts, only unlike the network executives they will not have the benefit of knowing whether their shows are going to be picked up for the upcoming fall season. These meetings are every bit as important as the ones you will be taking at the networks; not only can

a studio executive be a big help when it comes time for staffing recommendations, chances are that he will be on the receiving end of your original show pitches a few years down the line. And one additional fact you should be aware of is that studios often make lucrative “holding” deals—deals locking up a writer’s services—with writers they like; although this is primarily the case with more experienced writers, this very well could also be you down the line.

Third-party producers

On the list of credits that precede any given television show, you have probably noticed a flurry of producers’ names. In most cases, these are writers with assorted producer titles (more on that later); in some cases, the name in question belongs to a non-writing producer who has functioned more like a movie producer in bringing the show from gestation to air. In many cases, this producer is an actual movie producer who, intrigued by the fast pace of the television industry (as opposed to the more glacial pace of the film business), has decided to give television a shot. What this producer brings to the table is relationships with feature film writers—a premium in the movie-envy-filled world of television executives—as well as impeccable story skills and commercial instincts. These outside producers who team up with studios to generate fare for the networks are known as non-writing or “third party” producers.

It seems like a logical enough basis for a relationship, one in which all parties end up satisfied. Unless you factor in the fact that money from the budget must be put aside to pay third-party producers a producing fee (rather than, say, a one-time finder’s fee standard in every other business for the person who may have been instrumental in setting up the deal but in no way influences its outcome). Third-party producers argue that they do, in fact, shape the show creatively; while this is certainly true enough in most cases, it is patently untrue in many others. And it becomes almost egregious when you consider that every third-party producer paycheck comes out of the show’s writing budget, which turns into less money for writers and fewer writing jobs as a result.

Jerry Bruckheimer, King of the World

Jerry Bruckheimer was already that rarest of rare entities in the film world: a "signature" producer whose films bore his trademark stamp—in Bruckheimer's case, testosterone-driven films (*Top Gun*, *Bad Boys*, *Pirates Of The Caribbean*) whose action sequences and wry, off-the-cuff humor translated into billions of dollars of worldwide box office. Still, when he decided to bring his sensibility to the small screen, it was greeted by relatively little fanfare; after all, film giants like Spielberg had failed virtually every time they'd ventured into television. How could Bruckheimer—stripped of his nine-figure budgets—expect to succeed?

Bruckheimer started by pitching a mystery show about a group of crime scene investigators who, every week, use their forensic skills to solve murders. A "how-dunnit" rather than a whodunit, it was similar to Dick Wolf's *Law And Order* franchise that emphasized plot over more long-ranging character development. *CSI*—which stood for "Crime Scene Investigation"—was passed over by ABC, whose parent studio, Walt Disney, was home to Bruckheimer's production company. CBS ultimately picked up *CSI* and it became one of the last shows to make the fall schedule in 2000. CBS had high hopes that year for *The Fugitive*, an updated remake of the series starring David Janssen that had recently become a hit movie starring Harrison Ford, and *CSI* was barely given any hype whatsoever. Lo and behold, one year later *The Fugitive* had been cancelled and *CSI* was the new number-one show in television—a smash that would soon spawn two spinoffs, *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*.

The show's creative forces—most notably, Anthony Zuiker, its creator—are most certainly the reasons for the phenomenal success of *CSI*, and yet one can almost sense the invisible fingertips of Bruckheimer at the margins of every episode. Further evidence of his status as something of an impresario are the other CBS hits produced by his company: *Without A Trace*, and *Cold Case*, both of which bear the signature Bruckheimer look, a look that has generated a GNP-worthy tally of international box office to date. This just proves that the few producers with their finger on the pulse of contemporary pop culture should never be underestimated, as ABC—which only just bounced back this past year from having passed on the second-most successful franchise in television history—found out the hard way.

Showrunners

The showrunner is, in most cases, the person who created the show and is far and away the most important person you must impress in order to get a job. It is ultimately the showrunner's creative foresight that got the show on the air, and it is his or her (or their, if the show was created by a writing team) vision that will, hopefully, keep it there. If you are fortunate enough to have gotten one or more of these meetings set up through your agent's hard work and hustle (and, for the most part, it will be up to your agent to set up these meetings), this is the final hurdle left prior to getting a job.

A showrunner's job is pretty much to oversee every aspect of the show's development: sitting with the staff and generating story ideas, trying to get network and studio approval on those ideas so that they can "go to script" (be assigned to a writer, or team of writers to flesh out in script form), personally ensuring the quality of every script that goes to the network and studio brass (even if it means several late-night rewrites for the showrunner, which it usually does). Then it is the showrunner's job to make sure that the cast is happy with the script and entertain the (all too frequent) complaints from cast members regarding a particular episode's treatment of their character.

A showrunner for a one-hour show will then occasionally go off to the set (from a local studio soundstage to a remote location in Canada) to check on the actual physical production; a sitcom showrunner, however, always oversees physical production as it tends to take place on a soundstage right below the writing offices (sitcom writers, as a whole, tend to work longer hours than their one-hour writing counterparts, primarily because the writing tends to be done more collaboratively, but are not, for the most part, paid a higher salary). Showrunners want to ensure that the director's work is consistent with the show's other episodes so that the show does not appear to have (depending on the number of directors on staff) five or so entirely different looks. Showrunners work late nights and frequently weekends as well—it's safe to say that a showrunner's job is never done, at least until hiatus.

A Showrunner's Advice to Prospective Staff Writers

What are the best television writing samples?

- Write a show that's somewhat popular—no point in writing something you love but will be old news in six months... rest assured, your spec will grow stale quickly enough on its own.
- Pick a show you really like—you may not have a choice about where you get hired for your first job, but you do choose what you spec—so go with what you feel will be fun and best let your talents shine.
- Watch every episode you can of the show for which you're writing a spec. Try to get sample scripts so you can see how it feels and looks on the page. Get to know the show as much as you can.
- Before you start writing your sample, break down a few of the show's episodes into outline form and examine their story structure. Then outline your sample and see how it compares.
- Formatting counts. Get yourself a professional screenwriting program if you can. In addition to formatting, spelling counts. So does punctuation.
- Keep writing! Until your career is moving on its own momentum, you should always be working on a new spec. Painful as it is, the more you write, the better it gets.

Someone liked my samples -- I got a meeting!

- Great news. Now, first of all: find out who you will be meeting with and Google them. Walk into the room knowing what shows they've done and what they're doing now. This person stands between you and your future. Respect what they've accomplished. It's worth five minutes of research.
- If you're meeting on a particular show, watch as many episodes as you can before your meeting. Get scripts if you can.
- Whether or not you've been asked to prepare them, have ideas to pitch in your back pocket. Be ready with specific story ideas for both new episodes and general story and character arcs for the series. Be ready to pitch them in one-sentence and one-paragraph presentations if asked. But don't pitch if not asked to.

- If asked, have fun with it. Know that you're just spit-balling. It's generally impossible to pitch a show from the outside, so what you're really showing off here is your willingness to come up with ideas and be friendly about whatever reactions you get. Don't be defensive. They work on the show every day, and chances are they have a better sense of it than you do.
- Be yourself. A good part of the interview to get on staff at a show is the showrunner trying to find out what kind of work you'll do as a writer and what ideas you'll bring to the party creatively. Another important part is the showrunner trying to find out if they want to spend 12-18 hours a day in the writers' room with you.
- Listen for the cues as to when the meeting is over. Short doesn't mean bad. It means busy.
- Remember the part where 'spelling counts'? So do manners and hygiene. Arrive on time. Be nice to the assistants. This is Hollywood. This week's assistant can be next week's studio VP.

And send a thank-you note! Your mother taught you this part, right?

I got the job! I start next week! What do I do?

- Show up a little early. Stay a little late. And work harder than anyone else. If they ask for two ideas, pitch out three. If they ask for three, pitch out five, but be as brief as you can be. And deliver on time! This is a business.
- Remember, you're working for someone. Your job is to deliver what your boss wants, and make it the best you can. When you're starting out, you're in no position to tell anyone how to make their show.
- Be open to taking notes and rewriting. When you get notes, don't practice 'malicious obedience,' implementing exact notes to prove that they don't work. Listen for the INTENT of the notes, ask questions until you understand what isn't working—and then MAKE IT WORK as best you can.
- Stay positive. Remember the brevity thing. The hygiene thing. The hard work thing. And keep those ideas coming.
- Someone very smart once said, "Never chase the money, chase what you believe in creatively. The rest will follow." Someone else very smart once said, "work begets work and the more picky you are, the less you work." It's a mystery to me. Good luck.

The Staff

Okay, so now it's time to finally make sense of all those producers, story editors, and staff writers whose jobs you don't understand but whose pecking order will be essential for you to know once you're under consideration for a writing position on a television show. And that pecking order, from bottom to top, goes something like this:

- Staff writer
- Story editor
- Executive story editor
- Co-producer
- Producer
- Supervising producer
- Co-executive producer
- Executive producer

Their duties are outlined below—note, when it comes to salary, writing partnerships split the money 50-50 rather than double it; the prevailing logic being that each writer is doing half the work that a solo writer is doing and is thus paid accordingly.

Staff writers

A “staff writer” is the entry-level position for most writers. Occasionally, if a writer has extensive related professional experience (as a playwright or development executive, among other possibilities), she will be catapulted up a level or two, but for most new writers, this will be their post. Among their regular duties—contributing to story sessions, pitching episode ideas—staff writers are responsible for performing rewriting duties (or, in the case of sitcom writers, doing comic “punch up”) on scripts that are still not ready for the showrunner to give a final pass; it is not uncommon for staff writers, especially those working long, sitcom hours, to compare themselves to freshman fraternity or sorority pledges—but the weekly salary of anywhere from \$2,500 to \$3,500 (not inclusive of hiatus weeks) helps take some of the sting out of the interminably long hours. Staff writers will do the least actual script writing of all the staff members—most staff writers consider themselves lucky if, after 22 episodes (a show's typical year-long run), they've written one produced episode.

Story editors

A “story editor” and “executive story editor” are the next two rungs up. Instead of being paid by the week, story editors are paid by the episode (usually anywhere from \$4,000 to \$6,000)—which means that if a show has been picked up for thirteen episodes, the writer is guaranteed thirteen weeks of payment, regardless of whether the show is cancelled prior to airing—or even writing—all 13 episodes. Story editors are sometimes given the same duties as staff writers, but are expected to pitch and write anywhere from one to three episodes during the course of the year as they are being prepared for the next step: producing.

Producers

“Co-producers” and “producers” (\$10,000 to \$15,000 per episode, roughly) are doing double duty: pitching and writing episodes as well as helping shape the show’s creative development. This means that producers are expected to be more vocal during the story sessions in which character arcs and episodes are planned out, as well as contributing whatever they can towards the show’s actual physical production. Writers who make it to this level can realistically hope to become showrunners themselves a few years down the line—provided, that is, their present show manages to remain on the air for that long.

Supervising and co-executive producers

“Supervising producers” and “Co-executive producers” (\$20,000 to \$25,000 per episode) are the highest level of producers under the executive producer level (of which there are frequently many). Supervising producers can, if the co-executive and executive producers are tackling an especially difficult show-related problem, take over the writing room and oversee story and episodic development, but this is the closest they come to any supervisory position. Co-executive producers are really just a mini-step between supervising producers and executive producers: not yet ready to run the show themselves, but certainly top dog in the room when the executive producers aren’t around. Note that at times, certain executives who work for the third-party producer who set up the show will be granted co-executive producer status, but most of the time they’ll be given the hallowed title of executive producer.

Executive producers

“Executive producers” (\$30,000 per episode—and up, way up sometimes) can be anything from the showrunner, to co-executive producers who were simply promoted, to third-party producers who sometimes go weeks without showing up in the writing offices. They are expected to fill in for the showrunner should he be indisposed for any variety of reasons, and they will also be right there by the showrunner’s side to ensure that production runs smoothly. As is the case in so many corporate structures, executive producers will sometimes jump ship from a successful show that they do not expect to be running anytime soon to a new, unproven show that gives them the chance to be a showrunner. Executive producers will sometimes also be pitching their own shows to networks while still technically employed by a show—if the show is picked up come May, they are off to a bigger, brighter adventure.

Other Considerations

Midseason replacements

Shows that do not make the fall schedule but staff up in May and June just like every other show are known as midseason replacements. They function as something of a pinch hitter: a new show is dying in the ratings and is replaced midseason, sometimes with great (*Medium*) to spectacular (*Grey’s Anatomy*) results. A typical midseason replacement usually receives anywhere from a six- to eight-episode to eight episode order and can come on the air as early as November or as late as March. What this means for the writer staffed on one of these shows is a schedule that can be unpredictable—some midseason replacements staff up very late in the season (as late as November) and might come wooing you when you’re finished with your first midseason replacement (which, in some cases, would finish with enough time to allow you to write for another show). Ordinarily this wouldn’t be a problem, but if both shows last and get picked up you can be put in something of a bind—albeit a bind that falls squarely in the “embarrassment of riches” category.

Freelance writing

In order to ensure that new writers get a chance to work in the television industry, the Writer’s Guild mandates that every show must “farm out” two episodes per full-year order (a full-year typically consisting of twenty-two

episodes). Usually, these jobs go to friends of the staff's writers and producers who are struggling and trying to break in; however, plenty of careers have been started by merit of a good writer getting read by the showrunner, coming in to pitch some ideas, then doing an assignment based on one of them. A freelance writer is paid the Writer's Guild minimum per episode; sitcom episodes pay less due to fewer pages being involved. Make sure that your agent keeps you posted on which shows are looking to assign episodes and when, and nudge her to stay on top of the showrunners with whom you felt you connected.

Residuals

As mentioned earlier, "residuals" are back-end royalties earned on episodes you have written. The Writer's Guild is in charge of billing studios for these monies, and they are typically delivered in green-colored envelopes (known as "greenies") from the Guild's residuals department. Because residuals are paid out every time your episode airs (declining in value until it boils down to double-digit dollars and cents), domestically as well as overseas, the competition for episodes can be fierce during a show's run. Especially when you consider that a writer for *Friends* or *Seinfeld*—thanks to those shows' prodigious syndication runs—has earned in the neighborhood of \$100,000 for every episode they have written.

Final Analysis

There are few professions more difficult to break into, and stay in, than television writing. The jobs are few and far between, and you are always hopping from one to another with little—if any—assurance of stability. But if you have decided that this is the profession for you, that you have always wanted to write great television (and now, that term is no longer derogatorily referred to as an oxymoron), then you owe it to yourself to take a pragmatic, almost scientific approach to what makes the wheels of the industry turn. If you approach it with honesty, humility... and of course, a smidgeon of talent to boot, you will find that it can be done. And if you do succeed, remember the adage that the person who loves what they do never works a day in their lives, couldn't be more true.

About the Author

David Kukoff is a screenwriter and television producer who lives in Thousand Oaks, California. He has over ten produced television and film credits to his name, has developed projects for every major studio, and is currently Vice President of Creative Affairs for Los Angeles-based JTN Productions. Mr. Kukoff is a faculty guest lecturer at UCLA where he teaches a weekly screenwriting course, and is on the board of directors at The Writer's Arc, a not-for-profit screenwriting fellowship organization.

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